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Presentation Basics: Skills, Techniques, and Learning Styles

Jan M. Orf

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, jmorf@stthomas.edu

Marianne Hageman

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, mdhageman@stthomas.edu

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PRESENTATION BASICS: SKILLS, TECHNIQUES, AND LEARNING STYLES

Jan Orf and Marianne Hageman

INTRODUCTION

When designing a presentation, the librarian needs to consider what information, resources, and techniques need to be included to make the session memorable and part of the learning experience. There are many different presentation skills and techniques that the librarian can use in developing an instruction session. "Active learning" can also be included in designing the session and as methods of evaluating the presentation without taking a lot of time away from instruction. By examining adult learning styles and combining that knowledge with the presentation techniques that are most comfortable for the presenter, the instruction session can be interesting and retain the attention of the attendees.

DESIGNING THE PRESENTATION

There are several basic actions that should be considered during the preparatory stages when designing a presentation. The librarian should begin by setting goals and objectives for the session. The goals and objectives identify what he or she is attempting to achieve in the instruction session. Once these are set, the librarian should outline or flowchart the presentation. Either method is acceptable and depends on the learning style of the presenter (i.e., an outline for those

who are text-based learners and the flowchart for those who are visual learners).

The next step is to develop the opening and the closing. Some instructors write the opening first to define what information will be covered. Others prefer to start with the closing, which identifies the direction the presentation should take by showing where the session will end. The librarian should start with whichever he or she prefers and with which he or she is most comfortable. As part of the opening, the instructor should consider possible icebreakers to get the attention of the students and to make them more comfortable. Asking questions about their experiences on the resources to be covered, introducing themselves to the rest of the class, and brainstorming a "wish list" of what the students would like to have covered in the session are examples of possible icebreakers.

Methods of assessing the presentation should also be examined at this stage. The librarian should have some means by which to evaluate whether the students are grasping the concepts covered in the session. There are several methods of assessing during the session which will be discussed later in this paper. Further, the instructor can also assess the audience. Using icebreaker questions both at the beginning of the presentation, and at different times during the session, the librarian can discover at which level the students are and either adjust the instruction or make use of more experienced students who could help others who need additional assistance.

The next strategy in designing a presentation would be to break up the session into "teachable chunks." The average attention span of the adult learner

Orf is reference librarian and *Hageman* is acting reference coordinator, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota.

is 20 minutes. That means that each "chunk" should be a maximum of 20 minutes. Unfortunately, the average attention span of the traditional-age college student is only about seven minutes, so within each "chunk," the librarian should include different activities and presentation styles to keep the attention of all of the students in the class.¹ Within each "teachable chunk," there should be repetition in order to reinforce the major points. The librarian should 1) tell them what you are going to tell them; 2) tell them; and 3) tell them what you told them. The instructor should give an overview of the information to be covered in that section, then cover the material, and, last, review the main points that were covered within each "chunk."

The librarian also needs to consider what can NOT be covered in an instruction session. Because librarians frequently are given a limited time period to cover the material, there is often not enough time to cover everything that they would like. Therefore, the instructor must pick what he or she cannot teach and find ways to compensate. This may be done in several ways, including: 1) provide reference material or a bibliography that emphasizes the uncovered material; 2) give a phone number at which students can obtain additional help, or where they can schedule appointments for assistance; 3) try to give a brief overview of the information for which in-depth coverage cannot be provided; 4) find a way to follow-up the session with additional consultations or a session outside of class time; 5) attempt to sneak in an example of the uncovered material; 6) offer two sessions (or a series of sessions) if that can be arranged; 7) state up-front time needs so that the students are aware that there is still information available, which cannot be covered in the time allotted.

As previously stated, the librarian should begin designing the presentation by developing basic information like goals and objectives, outlining the session, creating the opening and closing, and reviewing possible icebreakers and assessment tools. Probably the most important factor to consider is the attention span of the students and therefore information should be presented in "teachable chunks," which provide an overview, detailed information, and a review of material within a time period not to exceed 20 minutes. The librarian also needs to consider what cannot be covered and consider ways in which the information can be included without exceeding the time limit of the class.

ACTIVITIES

Once the design basics have been completed, consider including different activities in the presenta-

tion. Why? Activities can reinforce learning and make it meaningful; they also can help get people involved. This incorporates "active learning": what one hears, sees, discusses, and does, allows one to acquire knowledge and skill.²

Plan activities carefully, to make them meaningful. Activities should be based on the presentation objectives. State the purpose of the activity, then give clear instructions and ask for questions to make sure people understand what they are to do. Monitor the participants during the activity, to see how they are doing and to see if questions have come up. Then "debrief" or discuss the activity; the librarian can review or summarize what has been covered, or can see if they have understood what was intended. One exercise we use for undergraduate marketing students has them break into small groups to discuss basic marketing questions and types of information needed (company, industry, and demographic information.) We come back together as a large group to review answers they have, and to discuss different options.

In planning activities, the instructor needs to consider different adult learning styles. People learn in different ways, and being aware of this causes the instructor to think about ways to reach the individuals in the audience in appropriate ways. In the literature of adult learning different labels are sometimes used, but we will use the terms *activists*, *reflectors*, *theorists*, and *pragmatists*.³ *Activists* are people who enjoy the here and now; they learn from new experiences and are extroverts. *Reflectors* tend to observe and analyze information at their own pace; they may mentally "step back" to think about things. They are good at collecting and analyzing data. *Theorists* value logic and rationality; they like concepts, models, and theories, and they like to explore the interrelationships between things. *Pragmatists* are practical and down-to-earth. They look for relevance and ask, how can I use this? (We all tend to be like this sometimes.) Many people are combinations of more than one learning style. Plan to have some of each of these in your audience.

There are various types of activities that can be included in a session. One of our favorites (that isn't too expensive) is stickers, which participants can use to highlight key points, or the instructor can hand out as a reward. Candy is another inexpensive option. Icebreakers have already been mentioned in beginning a session; they can also be used within a session for brainstorming, for polling participants, or for socializing. Exercises can be used to present materials instead of a lecture, or to check and see if people understand what has been covered.

Videotapes can also be used as an activity. They are useful to tell a story and to stimulate discussion. Remember to keep your video clip short; don't let it

be the presentation. Popular games such as “Jeopardy” or “Monopoly” can be used to repeat information and skills, to reinforce learning, and to get people to participate. Games can also involve more than one of the senses, another way to encourage learning. They can be planned as board games, pen and pencil, on a flip chart, or e-mail. Be careful with games done via e-mail if not everyone has equal access to an e-mail account, or if people only use their e-mail at certain times of the day.

As mentioned, activities can and should reinforce learning, so plan them carefully. Remember the four kinds of adult learning styles, and incorporate several types of activities into the sessions to accommodate them.

PRESENTATION SKILLS

There are many skills that can be included in a presentation which are easy to add to the instructor’s repertoire and can keep the students interested so that they will learn. The instructor can influence the students by using an unusual entrance, giving some background through which the students recognize that he or she also had to learn the material, relating the material to something that the students can understand, or even just getting them up and moving them around the room. The use of several different formats to present the information, as well as different types of resources frequently will keep and hold the attention of the attendees.

There is a scene near the beginning of the Robin Williams film *Dead Poets Society* that nicely demonstrates a variety of presentation skills. In the film Williams portrays an unorthodox instructor at a private boys’ school in the 1950s. On his first day as their new English instructor, he gets his students out of their chairs and into the hallway, starts to learn their names, and encourages them to “seize the day” and make their lives meaningful (he does this by having them look at photographs of former students and, while he has them lean in towards the display cases, whispers to them as if he were the voice of those past students.) It’s an interesting scene to watch and see the various techniques his character uses to engage his audience, catch their attention, and get them involved (such things as whispering, identifying them as individuals, getting them moving, and using humor).

When working on presentation skills, study the subject or otherwise review the materials. The more the presenter knows the material, the more confident he or she will feel.

In developing a presentation, a useful first step is to state the purpose or central idea in one or two

sentences. Some people find it helpful to put it in writing. This can be the “touchstone” as the librarian considers what to include, and how something relates to the purpose. When preparing the closing, think of it as the destination. Restate the key points in the closing; students will remember what they hear last.

An opening should catch the audience’s attention in some way. One of the most effective openings I’ve ever experienced was at a workshop on disaster planning and recovery that I attended some years ago. The presenter brought us into the basement of a new art museum, into an interior storage area, and then turned out the lights. It was pitch dark. She said, “Okay, you’re at work, and the power just went out in your building. What would you do?” As it turned out, only the presenter and one of my co-workers had small flashlights on their keychains. This definitely caught our attention and was directly related to the theme of disaster planning.⁴

In the opening, acknowledge the expertise of the students, since all will bring some “life experiences” to the session. Let the students know that their time will be well spent, and be prepared to show them “what’s in it for me?”

An instructor can use the *Know-Feel-Do* principles to develop the key points in a presentation. Ask what the students need to *know*, how they should *feel*, and what they should *do*, as a result of the presentation. Use “real-life” examples and anecdotes to support key points as an aid to remembering.

Develop visuals (flip charts, videotapes, overhead transparencies) to enhance learning and increase attention. It’s been said that 75 percent of what we know comes from the visual.⁵ In general, the presenter should use visuals to highlight key points, should not overuse them, and use that with which he or she is comfortable. Flip charts are good for recording information, for listing instructions, and for brainstorming. Try not to start writing at the very top: filling that large blank area can be intimidating. Start writing partway down the page; write on the top if necessary to fill up the page, then judge if it should be continued on another sheet. Practice writing on the flip chart from the side while facing the audience; turning your back to them while writing should be avoided.

In the literature useful tips for overhead transparencies can be found. Try to have each transparency cover a single idea. It’s recommended that there should be no more than six lines per visual and no more than six words per line: the “six-by-six rule.”⁶ While I like to use 18- or 24-point letters (or larger), a nice tip to check if the letters are large enough is to print out a page and throw it on the floor. If it can be read at one’s feet while standing up, it is large enough.

For videos and presentation software, remember that these should enhance the presentation. If not comfortable using them yet, the librarian should give some time to pick up those skills and use what works for him or her. Know the equipment, and double check things (if possible) before presenting. More than once we've experienced things like the mystery of missing bullet points on our slides!

One last tip: always have a "Plan B." I recently had to do a hands-on computer workshop—except that the computers weren't working. Nor could we find the backup overheads we'd made. Luckily, we had copies of the slides as a handout, and the students agreed to do the "lecture" part with me and the "hands-on" part on their own. Sometimes I've brought a blank overhead and a marker as backup. And some years ago at ALA I heard a speaker describe his experiences in presenting in parts of the world where there was no electricity!⁷

When developing the presentation, be clear on the purpose. Create memorable closings and openings, and use the "Know-Feel-Do" principles to develop your key points. Use real-life examples to aid remembering, and use visuals to enhance learning.

EVALUATING THE PRESENTATION

There are many reasons why a librarian would choose or not choose to evaluate a presentation. The most common reason to choose NOT to evaluate is the lack of time. Most library sessions are given limited class time and many librarians decide to cover more information rather than spend time handing out a questionnaire, providing time to fill it out, and collecting the finished surveys. However, there are many ways in which an instructor can evaluate during a session which take little time away from the purpose of the presentation. The librarian needs to decide at which level he or she wants to evaluate the session, and then find a method to do so.

Before deciding what level of evaluation need to be assessed, the librarian should realize that there WILL be negative evaluations that may be hard on the ego. The librarian needs to emphasize the average evaluation and try to ignore the extremes (although it is entirely acceptable to concentrate on the most positive ones). There are four levels of evaluation as identified by Donald L. Kirkpatrick.⁸ The first level evaluates reaction: did they like it? If the students did not like the session, that interferes with the learning process. This can be as easy as noticing that half the class is falling asleep, or being thanked and complimented as people leave the classroom.

The second level evaluates learning: did they learn? This is usually the level at which most librarians

evaluate their sessions. The third level evaluates behavior: will they use it? This level takes more time as it means that the instructor needs to follow-up the session with an additional evaluation. Sometimes this can be done by sending a questionnaire to the instructor of the class after the library-related assignment has been completed. Unfortunately, this frequently does not work, since the instructor may ignore the request to evaluate his or her students, or the students may not return the evaluation forms.

The fourth level evaluates results: did it make a difference? This is almost impossible for the librarian to evaluate since it measures the cost of the session versus the cost of not providing the information. It involves compiling the hidden costs that are extremely difficult to identify.

There are several methods of evaluating during the instructional session. The first method is the *T-chart* which prompts the students to identify the pros and cons of a topic. In order to use the *Apple Tree*, the students are given a paper apple (or apple blossom if it is spring!) and asked to identify one thing apiece that they have learned, or comment on how the instructor has accomplished his or her goals, or what they liked best and what they liked least about the instruction. They then tape the apples to drawn trees that are posted on the walls as they leave the room. *Post-It Notes* can be used in the same way. The objectives of the class could be posted around the room, and students could be requested to identify what was done to accomplish each objective, and then attach the post-it notes under each objective.

Another method of evaluation uses *index cards*. The students each receive a card and can be asked to identify what they liked best about the class on one side, and what they liked least on the other. A *wish list* can be used at the beginning of a session to identify what the students would like to cover, and the session could then be adapted on the spot to include those topics. If some topics are difficult to merge into the session, a question-and-answer time toward the end of the presentation could be included to cover the topics. The expertise of the students could be called upon to help answer the problems which the students wanted to cover.

One method that expands to cover the behavior level of evaluation is called "*Dear Instructor*." The students are given cards or pieces of paper and asked to write down what they would STOP doing because of what they learned in the session, what they would START doing because of what was mentioned, and what they would CONTINUE to do because the session reinforced the ideas or methods that they already were using. This requires follow-up, however. The librarian then needs to contact students, after an assignment has

been completed, in a week, in a month, or even three months later, and find out if they actually did STOP, START, and CONTINUE to do the things that they said they would.

Contests, games, and puzzles can be used in the session, not only as learning tools, but also as evaluating tools to find out if the students did learn anything. *Discussion groups* also can be used as a combination learning and evaluating method. While the groups are discussing their topics, the instructor can wander around the room and eavesdrop. This is a good method to use to see if the students understood what they were to do in their groups, as well as to see if they understood the material covered in the session.

If the instructor/librarian does decide to use a more lengthy evaluation form, there are several things that he or she should include. Some of the questions should be based on the objectives of the session. No questionnaire should consist of only open-ended questions or only ranking questions. A combination of these types of questions should be included in every questionnaire. A sample survey is included in the appendix to show how this can be done.

Evaluation of a presentation is essential to the improvement of the instruction, and is frequently needed for the personal evaluation of the presenter. Due to time limits and lack of cooperation with the course instructor, the librarian often does not have the time to include a formal questionnaire during or after the instructional session. Frequently, other methods can be used, which require little time and/or are part of the instructional session. When questionnaires are feasible or necessary, they should include a variety of types of questions, and some questions should be based on the objectives of the session.

CONCLUSION

When creating an instructional session, an instructor should begin by setting goals and objectives for the presentation, followed by developing the opening and closing, examining methods of assessing the session, and breaking up the presentation into "teachable chunks." The librarian should then consider different activities that could be included, like icebreakers, games, and exercises, in order to address the different learning styles of the students. Several techniques that can be included in the presentation—such as openings that catch and keep the students' attention, using the Know-Feel-Do principles, and making effective use of visuals—can make the session more effective for the students. Finally, the instructor can make use of numerous methods of evaluating the session at different levels, using both methods that take little time away

from the learning experience, and questionnaires, including different types of questions which rank the presentation and provide detailed feedback from open-ended questions.

In this paper, we shared presentation skills and techniques, examined adult learning styles and using "teachable chunks," discussed how "active learning" can be included in designing a session, and considered different methods of evaluating the session as part of the instruction session. A variety of methods should be incorporated in any presentation in order to attract and hold the attention of the students. The librarian should add new techniques and formats as he or she becomes comfortable using them.

NOTES

1. Linda Halverson, "Train the Trainer: Design Basics," a workshop by Linda Halverson, University of St. Thomas, 1995.
2. Mel Silberman, *20 Active Training Programs* (San Diego, CA: Pfeiffer & Co., 1994), 16.
3. Tony Pont, *Developing Effective Training Skills* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991, 54); and Halverson, "Activities."
4. Barbara Roberts, "Disaster Recovery Planning Conference," sponsored by the Upper Midwest Conservation Association at the Weisman Museum, University of Minnesota, 6 May 1994.
5. Linda Halverson, "Train the Trainer: Presentation Skills," a workshop by Linda Halverson, University of St. Thomas, 1995.
6. Halverson, "Presentation."
7. Michael Molenda, "Class Act: Producing and Presenting Library Instruction," a presentation at the American Library Association Conference, Chicago, IL, 25 June 1995.
8. Donald L. Kirkpatrick, *Evaluating Training Programs: Presentation Skills for Consultants, Trainers, and Teachers* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1993).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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APPENDIX 1

UST Libraries Electronic Resources Workshop Feedback

Name of workshop:

Date:

Your feedback helps us constantly improve our training services to you. Please respond below. Thank you.

1. Please name two things you understand better or will do differently as a result of this training experience.

1)

2)

2. How would you rate this program?

1

2

3

4

5

Not

Somewhat

Very

Valuable

Valuable

Valuable

3. Please rate the effectiveness of the following workshop objectives:

- a. To consider when to use the Web for research.

1

2

3

4

5

Ineffective

Effective

Very

Effective

- b. To learn search strategies and techniques.

1

2

3

4

5

Ineffective

Effective

Very

Effective

- c. To explore Web search systems.

1

2

3

4

5

Ineffective

Effective

Very

Effective

- d. To find Web resources on specific topics.

1

2

3

4

5

Ineffective

Effective

Very

Effective

4. How appropriate was
program length:

Too
Long

Perfect

Too
Short

program pacing:

Too
Long

Perfect

Too
Short

5. Please rate your interest level.

1
Little
Interest

2

3
Interested

4

5
High
Interest

6. Please rate the usefulness of information provided.

1
Not
Useful

2

3
Useful

4

5
Very
Useful

7. What specifically did you like about the program?

8. What specifically did you like about the instructors' performance?

9. What would make this a better program?

10. What would improve the instructors' performance?

11. What other programs, workshops, sessions would be useful to you?

Please return to: Jan Orf, Mail No. 5004