Presentation Reflection

Emily Lane

Penn State University

Author Note:
The prompt:

Recall a presentation that you have given in the past, either professionally or for a class assignment. How would you assess your level of comfort and confidence in giving the presentation? How did you feel? What did your audience struggle with? In light of this week’s readings and advice, how might you do things differently in the future? Record your thoughts in your Personal Reflection Journal and submit a summary of those thoughts.

As a teacher, my career is focused on my ability to give an effective presentation. My ability to present scientific ideas that follow a strict syllabus is directly related to the success of my students’ performance on standard tests. Because of this, I am constantly thinking about my performance in front of a group. I can’t recall the last time I walked out of my classroom without analyzing if my students were engaged, if I reached all of my aims, if I remembered to mention all of the announcements or collect all of the assignments, if I reviewed the material from the previous lessons? Did I present the information in a way that students with English as their second language could absorb it? Did I hurt a student’s feelings with a grade or a look? Did I embarrass them? Did I lose face as a professional because I misspelled a word on the board? The list goes on and on.

These are the questions that can keep me up at night because I worry about how people perceive me. In general, I feel very comfortable in front of a group of students because I know that they need to hear what I am saying. I have confidence that I can present scientific information in an accessible way without lulling the average student to sleep. However, when it comes to teaching in front of a group of professionals, I am much less comfortable. Just last week, I had to allow two science teachers to observe three lessons in succession. Throughout the lessons, they were taking a number of notes, but when I asked them questions to involve them in as I would to students, they wouldn’t respond. Directly after the lesson, they told me that I was an effective teacher and they hope to learn more from me.

However, later in front of my bosses and peers one of the women announced that in one of the three class periods they observed I made a mistake in explaining enzymes. During my warmup I asked a student how you could “kill” an enzyme, but I should have asked how an enzyme could be “denatured”. Although she was technically correct and her feedback was helpful, I felt upset that it was presented in such a public and forceful way. I think the criticism didn’t take into account that the lesson she was referring to was first period and the students were sleepy. I needed to be animated and related the material to them in order for them to wake up and engage.

I feel like the professional audience struggled with the jargon, while my student audience was excited by the material and their ability to show off what they know in a silly and fun way. I think about this lesson because, although the other two lessons the teachers watched went well, the only feedback that was announced to superiors was this one criticism. The approach of criticizing problems but not addressing positive aspects of my presentations affects my confidence in similar situations to follow. If I could repeat this lesson, I would take the jargon criticism into account and be more careful to emphasize the difference between talking in a relaxed way with my students and the specific words the standardized tests will acknowledge.

Along these same lines, I learned a lot from analyzing the TED talks and hope to apply some of the techniques they used. I noticed the comments on some of the TED talks and really appreciate the professionalism the presenters applied to those criticizing them. Often the presenter took the time to respond with respect and provide a scholarly article addressing specific arguments. I think I could learn a lot from this sort of response and hope to practice this in the future.

I also appreciated seeing how some of the presenters were visibly nervous at the beginning of their presentation and used stories and jokes to put both the audience and themselves at ease. More specifically, they utilized common experiences to connect their research to their audience. I also will also try to implement more suscinct summaries following my presentations. Having a clear plan in how to summarize the purpose of the presentation could help fix some of the concerns I have following a presentation. I could also alleviate concerns I have in using specific jargon within fun examples by providing handouts to follow along with. This way I can be sure that I cover all material required in a presentation while also making the material accessible to my audience.

Finally, I need to be more kind to myself after presentations. No human being can please everyone while also presenting difficult material. If after a presentation, whether it be in a meeting or in a class, if a student is confused or notifies me of a mistake, I shouldn’t let it hijack my mind. Instead I should learn from it and realize that if this was a student and I was telling them that they made a mistake, it wouldn’t change who they are to me. In the same way, me making a mistake doesn’t change who I am to them.