

One important part of a trainer's job is giving public talks or workshops. Though as teachers we are very used to working in front of and with groups of people, somehow doing this with peers or national and international colleagues can seem more frightening. We have thus included in the journal quite a lot of help over the years on how to run training sessions. Below, Andrew Wright, an occasional speaker, gives us his tips.

Some notes on giving talks at conferences

By Andrew Wright

Thank goodness the idea of workshops has been developed in recent years. But it would be a great shame if talks or lectures were rejected out of hand. I have no doubt that lectures will always have a useful role. The question for me is how to make them as worthwhile as possible.

The way one gives a talk is a reflection of a personal relationship with the receivers and with the subject; it is also a reflection of how one responds to the context both immediate and more general.

On the whole, my talks have been about the use of games and activities. I don't assume that the forms I use for this sort of theme would always apply to other people. However, colleagues might like to hear how a fellow 'occasional' lecturer goes about things. Here are some of the ideas which are important to me:

The receiver is as important as the subject

So all the normal communicator's criteria apply. Who are the receivers? What do they know already of the general area and of the specific subject you wish to deal with? What is their attitude to it? How do they value it? What form of communication are they used to? Would a different form please or offend them? What relationship do they conventionally have with a speaker? Must you mix authority/credibility with personal understanding? Can the teachers cope with broad perspectives in abstract terms or do they prefer instances?

The peripatetic speaker

You probably don't know the people you are talking to individually. I feel the need to speak to people I don't know before the talk so I usually try to get my things set up early and then chat to people as they come in. It helps me. I sometimes look for something that I can acknowledge in the people there in my talk.....like how they have given up time to come.....or that the best holiday for a teacher is watching another teacher working or I may try to comment on a more weighty aspect of what I am told concerns them, for example, a change in public examinations. Alternatively, I might begin by saying, "I've never taught in your schools and so cannot possibly advise you how to teach. Please see me as a traveling tinker who has various ideas and is offering them to see if they are of any use".

Starting with activities

Although I share the same general world of language teaching with the people there I do not share any specific experience that I can refer to. So I often like to begin with activities of some sort without explanation and then, after about ten minutes, stop and point out the issues which I think are important. In this way we have a common experience and a reference point. Dramatically it is marvelous to begin immediately with activities because the listeners become participators and there is so much more excitement. If the activities are intriguing, then curiosity is aroused, the listeners become active as they take part and, at the same time, search for an idea of why you have got that activity going. At the SPEAQ Conference in Quebec I began by juggling. Then I asked for a volunteer

and taught him to juggle. About half way through I asked people to make a note of the sort of language we were using and this gave them a hint of the point I was working towards.

The structure

Starting off with the broad structure of the talk does not appeal to me. However, I always try to give it after about ten minutes. And I do feel that it helps to be following a structure so people feel you know where you are going. A rigid structure or more particularly, written-out notes or even the full text is disastrous because people feel they cannot affect things and if they do you may be totally thrown. Perhaps the feeling of what I want to convey is even more important than the structure of the presentation I have in mind. The wonderful thing about being guided by feeling is that you are adaptable and that everything you say and do.....even the little things.....is filled with a sense of unity of purpose. For me the 'feeling' is usually that I want to enjoy myself with everyone there.

Individuals

I need the participation of the people there. For this reason I build into my talks activities all the way through. And I always try to respond fully to individuals. If there is a very demanding individual, I usually try to respond but if they seem to be determined to go up an 'alley' (in my view) I will say something like, "that's a very interesting point. I don't think I can cope with it at the moment. Perhaps we can talk about it afterwards". If someone is being aggressive for some reasons, I sometimes put the point back to everyone else, inviting a response and then it is normally dealt with to everyone's satisfaction.

Pace

I do think that pace is important. There is room for slow and fast pace. A slow pace should never be because of muddled notes or inadequate control of the a/v equipment etc. but because that is the nature of the feeling of the activity. If people feel you are talking slowly and moving slowly for a significant purpose, they can be on the edge of their seats! But I tend to like a fast pace for at least some of the time. In this I like to introduce the idea of tantalizing people, perhaps by doing something nice with them and then stopping it just as they are beginning to drop from the height of their involvement.

Market Sellers of blankets and cheap crockery have some great techniques. One of them is to address, with some intensity, a particular person in response to a comment he might have overheard, or to some gesture or movement he claims to be able to interpret. An intense moment or two with someone about halfway to the back and slightly to one side is so intriguing for everyone else. Done too much it might be irritating though!

Jokes

I love to be involved in the subject and in the whole act of trying to communicate. For me the moment is so important. I am prepared to risk a lot to try to relate to people. This can be done by jokes, anecdotes and a bit of fun but if the teachers feel that there is nothing more to the talk than fun they will go off feeling pretty cheated. Obviously they have to feel that you care about the subject, you know about it and you can see it from their point of view. Jokes just told to 'warm up' the listeners are a mistake, I believe. The joke should arise out of the concept being developed and should highlight aspects of it.

There are so many things I don't know about in everything I have a go at, obviously. If one of them comes up I say so and without shame. I think I may disillusion a few people but I hope this is outbalanced by the feeling that I am, after all just like them, doing my best but far from infallible.

Take-home ideas

In most of my talks I try to get activities going and some individual responding and thinking going on too. However, I feel that there is very often an expectation that a 'lecturer' is going to give them something which can be used on 'Monday'. Many teachers have hardly been to inservice training before and are more likely to feel positive and helped if they have something positive to take away with them than if they have simply undergone an unusual experience. I think if one can give the teachers some things they can actually use and which contain the living yeast of a 'new' way of thinking they

will have a chance of realizing the power of the underlying idea through the act of experiencing its success in their own classrooms.

Gesture and movement

For me these are important. For large groups of people between 30 and 500 I think gestures and movement are very important. (Above 500 people and the back rows probably can't see your body movements! So voice, speech and a big OHP screen become the vehicles.) Body movements help to emphasise the way you are structuring your talk, and the pace (like a conductor). They help you to stress detail and they help you convey feeling. They allow you to indicate individuals you may be talking to.

Big gestures are important for large groups. People used to talking to large groups sometimes find it difficult to talk to small groups. (Similar to a difference between acting for film and acting in the theatre?)

Gestures and movements can either be used to support spoken language or to offer contradictory concepts and feelings or they can be used on their own without speech.

I think you use gestures should be known to the people you are talking to and not gestures from your home area and not personal mannerisms without any communicative direction.

It is silly but I feel slightly ashamed to talk about gesture and movement. I suppose it is because of the long history of dominance of the world and the scorning of non-verbal forms. Yet body movement is one of the most powerful ways of affecting people for better or for worse..... so continuing..... I think we would speak of the need for clearly articulated gestures as we would speak of the need for clearly articulated speech. I believe that gestures should be timed to fit with spoken language (or the other way round like Mrs. And Mr. !!!!!) Gestures should usually only take place with one part of the body at once.....the mime's arm unfolds, the hand unfolds and the finger..... and then it points! I'm sure there's more to it than that but I haven't studied the grammar of body movement.

And, to return to my very first point, whilst believing that we must communicate we must obviously do so in our own way.

Visuals

OHP visuals are useful in several ways:

- if you are nervous, then you can base your whole thing on transparencies and they will take you through your talk.
- they give an alternative way of saying what you are trying to express orally.
- they can do some things you cannot do orally particularly giving a holistic view of a number of different relationships.
- some people need to see an idea written down.

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