

GETTING PAST 101

How to Bring Value and Relevance to Presentation Skills Training

A White Paper by
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For Learning and Development leaders, few things are more frustrating than ineffective training sessions. Not only are they a waste of resources—both in money and in time spent away from work—they also poison the L&D well for participants in the class.

This is especially true with presentation skills training. Trainees come to a presentation skills workshop with specific needs, varied levels of experience and, in many cases, a high level of anxiety. Too often, though, the difference between what presenters need and what the class delivers is vast. When that happens, trainees walk away saying:

“I got nothing out of it.”

“That’s not going to work for me.”

“That was a waste of my time.”

This white paper will address these issues and provide recommendations for ensuring that presentation skills training meets the needs of the business and each presenter in the class.



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The Problem

Many Presentation Skills Workshops Miss the Mark

Here are some common problems and omissions:

- Training often focuses on a type of presentation that participants don't deliver. Business presenters face a range of situations—most of them are less formal, more interactive and more nuanced than what is taught in the presentation skills classroom.
- Too many workshops fail to take the participant's prior experience with presenting and the influence it has had into account.
- Information about how to organize presentations and deliver slides (or other visuals) is not as practical, flexible or relevant as it needs to be.
- Training fails to offer practical recommendations for managing the nervousness associated with presenting.

When the workshop misses the mark on any of these issues, it leads to ineffective training and wasted resources.

The Root of the Problem

Hanging on to Public Speaking 101

Much of what goes wrong with presentation skills training can be traced to the influence of Public Speaking 101. While 101 classes vary from school to school, the fundamental principles and methodology have been around for decades, and we're all familiar with them. But today's business presenter needs something more than 101 and something better than a training experience that is heavily influenced by it.

Methodologies that work in an academic setting simply don't apply in the corporate training environment.

This is not meant to condemn the Public Speaking class you took in college. 101 is an academic course that does what it intends to do very well. But what it intends to do and what a corporate presentation skills workshop should do are very different things. Based on my experience and what we hear from our clients and trainees, many training companies are still relying on parts of the 101 model.

What business presenters need is a fresh start. They need a new way to think about presenting and presentation training, one that (1) defines the process realistically, (2) helps presenters assess and adapt their behavior appropriately, and (3) develops the skills they need to succeed over the long term.

A Note from the Author:

In the 1980s I was a graduate student in Speech Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. While I was there, I taught many sections of Public Speaking 101.

As part of the research I did for this white paper, I took a trip back to my old campus to pick up the 101 text book currently in use. I also had the chance to catch up with one of my former colleagues before heading to one of her 101 classes. Based on what I learned on that trip and from the other research I've done, I'm confident that the statements I make here about 101 are as accurate today as they were when I taught the class 25 years ago.

Let's begin this discussion by looking at the five characteristics of 101 that are hanging on in many traditional presentation skills workshops.

1. **Focus on speeches.** 101 students typically deliver two types of speeches—informative and persuasive. These are formal speeches that usually do not include Q&A.
2. **Arbitrary topic delivered to classmates.** One of the biggest challenges for 101 students is finding a topic to speak about. While topics often need to be approved by instructors, students are free to select anything they're interested in.
3. **Students are seen as blank slates.** Students in 101 are assumed to be blank slates. Because it is a basic level course, there is no prerequisite and prior experience is not expected.
4. **Delivery is evaluated from the outside.** The physical and vocals skills used to deliver the presentation are judged on the impression they have on listeners.
5. **Nervousness is discussed as something to be prevented or eliminated.** 101 teaches that presentation anxiety should be prevented and can be eliminated through practice.

As familiar and benign as these characteristics seem to be, their presence in a workshop for business presenters is harmful. Let's look at each of them in more detail.

Traditional Approach #1

Focus on Speeches

The first issue is an obvious one: training needs to focus on the type of presenting trainees actually do. While it might seem that presentations are simply informal speeches (delivered to smaller audiences and involving some degree of interaction with them), they are, in fact, a fundamentally different process that needs to be approached as such.

The difference between a speech and a presentation has to do with both how they are prepared and how they are delivered.

But...

Business presentations are not speeches, and the skills and techniques used to deliver them are not the same.

Speechmakers use a script, and getting the script right is the driving force behind the process. The script is written, refined and rehearsed. When the speech is delivered, the audience watches a performance that has been practiced to be perfect. In this way speechmaking is like acting.

Presentations are different. Preparing them involves putting together an outline and, usually, slides. Whether presenters practice delivering their presentations or not, the goal is never to deliver a “performance.” The goal is to deliver a clear, appropriate message in a spontaneous, conversational way. The audience for a presentation wants to feel that (1) the presenter is speaking directly to them, (2) this is the first time the presenter has said these things in exactly this way and (3) they can interrupt the presenter at any time with questions or comments.

Because of this, the driving force behind a presentation is the presenter’s connection with and response to audience members.

Why is this important?

Training that focuses on the speechmaking process will not help people successfully deliver presentations. Since the goal of the presentation is to connect with listeners and persuade them to think or do something, presenters need to be flexible enough to do what it takes to make that happen.

Assuming that “practice makes perfect,” will have two undesired effects: (1) it will diminish the presenter’s ability to be spontaneous and adaptable, and (2) the presenter’s attention will go to saying things perfectly rather than communicating a clear message to listeners.

Traditional Approach #2

But...

Business presenters must practice real-life content for real-life audiences.

Arbitrary Topic Delivered to Classmates

In Public Speaking 101, students are free to speak to their classmates on any topic they want. What's important is that the speech be organized well, supported with convincing research and adequately persuasive or informative. Unless a particular topic has been assigned by the instructor, a student's success has little to do with what he or she speaks about. Success is judged on how the presentation is put together and delivered.

This is not the case with business presenters. Training for them should focus on a real-life presentation, prepared with its actual audience in mind. Like 101, presenters need to be given a practical organizational strategy to follow. But unlike 101, training needs to focus on its nuanced application.

For example, let's say everyone in a presentation skills training workshop works for the same organization. Each manages a team of sales people. Some people in the class are working on presentations to be delivered to customers using slides. Others are working on presentations to be delivered to their teams using handouts while seated. They have all been given the same organizational strategy to follow. During the workshop, these types of issues come up.

- Marie is frustrated because she has to use slides created by the marketing department. She thinks her customer will never understand them.
- Pete is new to the company. He's working on a quarterly report for management. Others in the workshop tell him that he's not focusing on what management will want to hear.
- Collette receives feedback that she can't say some of the things she plans to say to her team without raising some serious HR issues.
- Tim says that his boss likes to have presentations organized in a certain way and that way is different from the organizational strategy the class is using.
- Lucy says she has a great long-term relationship with her buyer and that all he wants is the bottom line.

Working on real-life situations that presenters face day-to-day ensures that learning is practical and relevant, and results in long-term business application.

Once the door is open to these issues, the process moves away from the fundamentals of how to organize a presentation and toward its real-life application for an actual audience. Each presenter's situation needs to be discussed until solutions are found. This is challenging for trainers. In a single workshop, a huge range of issues can come up, often placing trainers in the position of facilitating lengthy discussions of business strategies, support graphics, customer demands, internal politics and so on. These are exactly the issues that should be discussed, though, and good trainers don't shy away from the challenge.

Why is this important?

The obvious answer to this question is that working with real-life content makes training practical and focused. Every presenter leaves the workshop with a presentation ready to deliver and the skills to do it. What they've learned can be applied to the range of topics and situations they face.

Beyond that, participants have learned how solutions can be found to a variety of challenging presentation issues. By working together, they learn to adapt the organizational strategy they've learned to real-life situations and develop a common approach and language the team will carry with them long after training.

Traditional Approach #3

Students Are Seen as Blank Slates

The assumption in a 101 classroom is that the students are blank slates upon which the fundamentals of public speaking can be written. While some students will probably be more experienced than others, it doesn't change how the class is delivered. Since 101 is an introductory course, a student's prior knowledge and experience don't affect how the course is taught.

The opposite is true in the corporate classroom. There, training needs to respond to the knowledge and experience participants already have. Some of this is easy to discern because it's top-of-mind for presenters. For example, workshop participants often talk about:

But...

Business presenters are not blank slates, and their experiences matter. They have rich histories, habits, personalities and assumptions that should not be ignored.

- Past successes or failures
- Previous training sessions
- Their attempts to follow the advice of their managers or peers
- What they've learned from books, websites and blogs

On another level, presenters are shaped in ways that aren't quite so easy to see. For example:

- Overall job responsibilities—people in similar jobs often approach presenting in the same way.
- Individual coping mechanisms—an individual's approach to the process is often shaped by the anxiety they feel about presenting, often leading to over- or under-preparing.
- What feels better—presenters often do what is comfortable or habitual for them rather than what is best for the presentation.

As a result of all of these influences, presenters come to training with a set of assumptions about what does and does not work for them. These assumptions have a huge influence, and, whether that influence is good or bad, it must be acknowledged.

Presenters come to training with a set of assumptions and strategies that – good or bad – must be respected and understood.

Training should begin by examining the struggle each person goes through as he or she prepares and delivers a presentation. They should be asked questions like these:

- In general, what type of communication do you prefer and why?
- What part of the process of preparing and delivering a presentation are you most and least comfortable with?
- How do you feel about preparation and practice? Do you feel it is time well spent or time wasted?
- What do you think is the key to a successful presentation?
- Does the presence of an audience energize or frustrate you?
- How do you feel about interactions during your presentations? Do you welcome them or dread them?

Why is this important?

Presenters are shaped by the experiences they've had. They make assumptions and apply strategies—some of which they are not aware of—that are unique and important. If training fails to take this into account, it will be nothing more than a blanket application of best practices, helpful for some presenters but harmful for others.

But if training accepts the fact that every presenter has a fundamentally different way of thinking about the process, trainers can help them develop skills and insights that are appropriate for them.

Traditional Approach #4

But...

Effective delivery doesn't start with how a presenter *looks*, it starts with how the presenter *feels*.

Therefore, delivery skills must be developed from the inside out.

Delivery Is Evaluated from the Outside

Delivery skills are the nonverbal physical and vocal skills we use to communicate. They include vocal intonation, eye contact, volume, pausing, speaking pace, facial expression, gestures, movement, posture and so on. While these are the skills that bring face-to-face communication to life, referring to them as “delivery skills” during a presentation is misleading. “Delivery” is more appropriately used to describe speechmaking—where skills have been rehearsed and polished to look and sound a certain way. And they are judged accordingly.

When this approach to delivery is applied to presentations, it often leads to strict, prescriptive rules. Here are a few common examples:

- Leave your hands at your sides because gestures can be distracting.
- Never turn your back on your audience.
- Hold a pen or use a pointer to look more professional.
- Never walk in front of the screen.
- Eliminate fillers words like um and uh.

While rules like these were developed in a genuine attempt to solve delivery problems, they pose problems for presenters. First, they're generic and without context. A presenter could break every one of these rules and still be very successful. More important, they work against the informal, spontaneous nature of presentations. Worrying about these rules pulls the presenter's attention away from their listeners and message, and focuses it on “correct” behaviors. This makes the presentation a performance.

Why is this important?

The physical and vocal skills a presenter uses cannot be separated from their natural context. They cannot be evaluated solely from the outside or reduced to generic rules. These skills are simply the tools presenters use to get the job done.

So when evaluating presenters, the first question that needs to be asked is not, “How does this presenter look or sound?” But rather the *presenter* needs to be asked

questions like, “How did that feel?” and audience members should be asked if the presenter successfully initiated a conversation. That’s where the discussion of delivery skills must begin.

Traditional Approach #5

Nervousness is Discussed as Something to be Prevented or Eliminated

The fear of presenting is well known. As you would expect, in 101 classrooms and traditional corporate training classes alike, nervousness is discussed. The problem is that it is *only* discussed. It is discussed as a natural reaction, as something that provides a boost of energy, as something that will go away in time. While some of what is said about nervousness is true, practical strategies to manage nervousness in the moment that it strikes are not offered.

But...

What’s needed is more than talk. Presenters need a way to *manage* their nervousness.

For example, here are some of the ideas about nervousness that are included in *The Principles of Effective Speaking*, a 101 course manual (Clark and Adasiewicz, 51-53):

- Understand that performance apprehension is normal and widespread.
- Understand that you feel more nervous than you look.
- You won’t forget your key ideas (because your key word outline will prompt you).
- You may consider memorizing your opening and closing statements.
- Don’t forget to eat.
- Take a long walk to walk off nervousness.
- Arrive to class early and talk to your classmates.
- Take a few deep breaths before you speak.
- Your instructor and classmates are sympathetic listeners.

Failure to genuinely address people's nervousness is a major omission in many training programs.

While some of these are good ideas (using a key word outline and memorizing your opening and closing are not), none of this has anything to do with managing nervousness in the moment that it occurs. This is a major omission because there are strategies that can be applied.

Why is this important?

Business presenters deserve a better answer to the question of nervousness because, unlike what they have been led to believe, nervousness can be managed in the moment. The process requires assessment, experimentation and coaching – all with the goal of identifying and developing the skills that help presenters get past their nervousness when it strikes. When their nervousness is under control, they're self aware, able to gather their thoughts and able to manage the give and take of the process.

Recommended Approach

What to Look for When Shopping for Presentation Skills Training

What business presenters need is a training and coaching process that moves beyond 101. It needs to be practical and responsive. It would focus on real-life topics, flexible delivery options for each presenter and realistic interactions with listeners.

Because of the nuances involved, trainers should take a consultative approach

Here's what to avoid and what to look for:

Avoid

Instead, look for

Training that does not focus on the preparation and delivery of a real-life presentation

Training that helps presenters prepare and practice delivering an upcoming presentation

Training that does not adapt to the presentation situations presenters actually face

Training that allows participants to use whatever support material (slides, handouts, flipcharts) and degree of formality (standing or seated) they would use in real life

Training that does not view questions and interactions as an essential part of the presentation process

Training that gives presenters practice managing questions, interruptions and discussions during their presentations

Training that merely talks about skills or offers lists of tips or secrets to guarantee success

Trainers that take a reasoned, consultative approach, one that builds skills and focuses on individual solutions to real-life challenges

Other things to look for:

Coaching

Because presentation skills development is a uniquely complex process, training should have a strong coaching element. Coaching needs to focus on how each presenter responds to the experiential learning process, with special attention paid to how new skills and techniques feel to presenters. Through responsive training and coaching, presenters would build on their strengths, overcome their weaknesses and learn what they need to do to continue to improve.

Small Class Size

Classes should have limited enrollment to ensure adequate individual attention and time to experiment and discover.

What you'll gain

Investment in this type of training will reap these benefits:

- **Training will meet the needs of the business.**
The presentations developed during training will address the real-life challenges presenter's face so that success in the classroom can be recreated on the job.
- **Training will have positive long-term effects**
because presenters will be able to apply best practices to their personal situations and focus on the skills and techniques that work for them. They will walk away with a clear, individual action plan.
- The self awareness presenters gain through training will help them be **more efficient** as they prepare their presentations and **more responsive** when they deliver them.

Turpin's Solution

Redefine the Process

At Turpin Communication, we deal with the residual effects of 101 every day. In every workshop we deliver, we help participants unlearn approaches that don't work for them and throw out rules that have been a burden. We give presenters the insight they need to be themselves and follow their own rules.

Three Principles

Our training is built on three principles. First, we redefine the process. In doing this, we underscore a solid break with speechmaking. Second, we help people understand what they need to do to prepare effectively and why everyone *shouldn't* prepare in the same way. Finally, we take the mystery out of stage fright and comfortable delivery. By attacking nervousness head on, we help presenters strengthen and use the skills that will help them succeed.

Principle #1

Presentations are Orderly Conversations

If we agree that presentations are not simply informal speeches, we need to figure out exactly what they are. We need to know what makes presenting so challenging and what makes them succeed or fail.

Orderly because they're carefully prepared; conversational because they need to feel spontaneous.

At Turpin, we think the challenge of presenting comes down to a simple fact. Presentations share characteristics with two distinctly different ways to communicate—writing and conversation. They are a hybrid.

When presentations succeed, they have the clarity and structure of a well-developed written message *and* the lively quality of spontaneous conversation. When they fail, they've lost one or the other. That is, when the presentation is pulled too far in one direction—when structure trumps spontaneity, for example, or when the conversation wanders too far afield—the strength of the hybrid is lost.

Because of this, we need to think of presentations as *orderly conversations*. By defining the process this way, training can focus on how the tension between the “orderly” and the “conversational” plays out for each presenter.

There are two points at which the orderly and the conversational are most at odds.

1. **During the preparation process.** From the very beginning, presenters need to focus on how one prepares to be both orderly *and* conversational. This is not a question of what organizational strategy is used (although that is part of our training as well). Rather, this question steps back to look at how individuals think about preparation. It focuses on the value and usefulness individuals place on the preparation process. This is an important question since there are many ways to prepare successfully.
2. **During the first few moments of the presentation.** At this point, presenters need to initiate the conversation. They need to establish a connection with their listeners and communicate a sense of order and direction. This is also the point at which nervous presenters must take control of their presentation anxiety.

From there...

We help presenters understand that: first, they have a default approach to preparation and structure that needs to be managed (principle #2), and second, they need to focus on the engagement skills that work best for them (principle #3).

Principle #2

Understand Your Default Approach

Some presenters default to the orderly side of presenting, others to the conversational. Understanding this is key to a presenter's success.

One of the most fundamental differences between presenters is the value they place on the preparation process. Some people place high value on it. Others don't. These are equally-valid, fundamental preferences resulting from many influences—personality, previous training, and job responsibilities to name a few. As a result of these influences, every presenter has developed a default approach to preparation. Some people default to the orderly side of presenting; we call them Writers. Some default to the conversational side; we call them Improvisers.

No judgment is placed on either default. Both can be equally successful. But by understanding what their default is, presenters learn what they need to do to improve. Generally, Writers need to remind themselves that their presentations will never be perfect, no matter how much they strive for it. An Improviser's improvement starts with the realization that a well-prepared presentation is not a straightjacket.

Writers thrive with order and preparation, but can be inflexible during delivery.

Improvisers thrive with conversation, but can lack focus during delivery.

Here are a few more details about Writers and Improvisers.

Writers

Writers assume that the success of a presentation lies in what they do before they deliver it. Writers are naturally thorough and often feel there is never enough time to prepare. Because of this many Writers over-prepare, essentially creating a script.

Improvisers

An Improviser's sense of success lies in his or her ability to establish a connection with listeners. As a result, preparation does not play the same role for an Improviser as it does for a Writer. Some Improvisers delay preparation. Some are not very thorough or careful.

Both defaults can be equally successful presenters, of course. But what they need to do to succeed is different.

So, as they prepare:

Writers need to:

- Simplify their slides
- Think about different ways to explain ideas
- Prepare to be flexible

Improvisers need to:

- Start with a clear agenda
- Pay special attention to slide titles
- Prepare to be concise

And during delivery:

Writers need to:

- Trust themselves
- Stop trying to be perfect
- Emphasize the big picture and listener benefits

Improvisers need to:

- Stay focused
- Stick to the agenda
- Improvise within the confines of each slide

Which, will lead to:

Although these types of adjustments won't feel natural, making them will lead to:

- Clear, easy to follow structure
- An appropriate level of detail
- Concise explanations
- Flexible, conversational delivery

Principle #3 Use Your Engagement Skills

If we accept the idea that presentations are essentially conversations, it's pretty clear that the first few minutes need to focus on initiating it. Presenters need to engage their listeners, and to do that they need to be engaged themselves. Sounds simple enough, but it's not. During those first few minutes presenters can be preoccupied (or disengaged) for many reasons. Among them:

- Writers are thinking about the “orderly” part of the process, whatever it is that they have planned to say.
- Improvisers are thinking about the reaction that they hope to get from listeners.
- Most people are nervous, sometimes to the point of complete distraction.

Once presenters are engaged, their natural skills and personalities emerge.

Getting past these concerns to initiate the conversation requires the purposeful use of *engagement skills*, eye contact and pausing. Of all the physical and vocal skills presenters use, these are the most fundamental because they help presenters think more clearly and feel more comfortable.

Eye Contact

Eye contact brings presenters and listeners into the conversation. This is not simply the *appearance* of eye contact. It is genuine, responsive, one-to-one eye contact. Presenters need to approach the beginning of their presentation in the same way they would welcome a group of people into their homes. It's personal, and its effect is felt on both sides. When presenters are nervous about speaking to a group of people, the last thing they want to do, of course, is look audience members in the eye. So engaging listeners requires a conscious effort. Will this feel comfortable immediately? Maybe not. But it will lead—quite quickly in most cases—to an engaged, comfortable presenter.

Pausing

Adequate pausing helps presenters slow their racing thoughts. It helps them think about what they're doing and remember the plan they've made. The challenge here is that when presenters are disengaged, pausing is absolutely counterintuitive. For many people, beginning a presentation brings momentary panic, very much like the moment you realize that you're lost in an unfamiliar place. Finding your way requires that you stop what you're doing, assess your surroundings, adjust your perspective and make your way back. This may only takes seconds, but it won't happen until you pause and think. The same thing needs to happen with presenters when their minds are racing.

Once presenters are engaged in the orderly conversation, their natural skills and personalities emerge. They are self aware and able to manage the complexities of presenting.

During a workshop, these skills must be developed from the inside out, with emphasis placed on how their use makes presenters feel. This is not simply because presenters want to feel good when presenting, although that's ultimately desirable. Rather, it's because presenters need to experience the feeling of engaging their listeners during training so they can recreate that feeling in real-life situations.

So...

Take a look at the presentation skills training your organization is currently offering. If it looks a little too much like the Public Speaking class you took in college, get in touch with Turpin Communication. We'll help your presenters build the skills and perspective they need to meet their business goals.

Contact

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Works Cited:

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