Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Inspiring ideas: Traditional presentations revisited

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This paper focuses on a novel presentation format that facilitates more active audience participation. We provide the organizational details, the rationale supporting the format and the advantages for both presenters and audiences. The authors are EFL teachers who believe in the value of students being actively engaged in their own and each other's learning processes. In the classroom "actively engaged" can mean giving students opportunities to express beliefs and opinions on a topic as well as to tutor and actively listen to their partners. Mirroring these classroom beliefs and practices, on the conference circuit we are also aware of the tremendous potential for active participation to maximize the conference-goers' learning and also be of benefit to the presenter.

　筆者は、学習者の積極的な姿勢を作りだすためには、学習者自らが参加しようとする意識を促進させることが重要だと考察している。同様に、プレゼンテーション参加者が発表者と共に意欲的に学ぼうとする姿勢を増加するという潜在的な可能性について強い関心を抱いている。本論は、プレゼンテーション参加者による積極的な参加を促進する新しいプレゼンテーション方法に焦点を置き、その構成の詳細とそれをサポートする理論的根拠、またプレゼン発表者と参加者に対する利点を述べる。

CHALLENGING

LOOKING IN
LOOKING OUT

ASSUMPTIONS

An *Inspiring Ideas Presentation* (IIP) provides an innovative and refreshing way of conducting presentations which can 1) maximize both presenter and audience participation and learning, 2) provide immediate feedback on research and teaching ideas, 3) allow audience participants the satisfaction of problem solving and collaborating with peers on matters of professional importance, and 4) give participants voice (agency) so that they can share and shape ideas that will help them do better jobs. In this article we will first elaborate a definition and rationale for IIPs. Then we will outline the structure of an IIP in general, along with three specific creative brainstorming formats to enhance audience participation. Finally, we will consider advantages for both presenters and audience members.

What is an IIP?

The basic premise of an IIP is to turn a traditional presentation on its head. (The authors would like to credit David Barker, a Nanzan University teacher, for envisioning this presentation structure and first organizing IIPs at Nanzan University.) Often in traditional presentations the presenter speaks most of the time with a mere five minutes allocated at the end for audience participation, usually in the form of asking questions. In an IIP, this format is reversed.

First, the presenter lectures for five minutes on her chosen topic by describing her research, its value, and the direction she would like to take it. The audience listens. After the brief lecture, the expert then *hands over* the presentation by stimulating the audience with a guiding question or clear focusing theme. The presenter invites her audience to *take over* responsibility for the direction of the topic. They may do this in a variety of creative brainstorming formats, such as: Talking 3s, the Disney Strategy, and the Way of Council. These discussion formats, usually timed by a moderator for about 15 minutes, are designed to give participants time to articulate their points of view and to listen to other members. As the audience discusses the topic, the presenter circulates and listens. The roles are now reversed as the expert becomes a quiet listener to the audience, who are activated to express their opinions, knowledge, and creative restructuring of the topic. The presenter's silence allows the audience to take over the idea without the risk of it being further shaped by the presenter. After this the IIP is wrapped up by the presenter who is given a final minute to summarize what she has heard, how she has benefited and what derived in terms of *payback* from the audience. In this way she can clarify or add to any key comments from the participants.

Presenters of an IIP must therefore do the following: 1) set the scene, 2) make the topic personal and relevant, 3) clearly and concisely explain any theory and practice of the subject, and 4) organize ways to stimulate audience discussion, all in 5 minutes. Admittedly, this is challenging to achieve in 300 seconds. So, with this framework in mind, let's now examine more deeply the experience and benefits of using the IIP as a vehicle for presentations.

Rationale
The elevator test

Imagine you are selling a product and the potential buyer you have arranged to meet must suddenly dash out for an

emergency meeting. Therefore you are limited to the time it takes to walk with him out of the office, ride down in the elevator, and then to his car in the parking lot in order to sell your product. Could you effectively get your message across? Now think of a presentation that you could give in the near future. Does it presently pass the elevator test? What would you need to cut or reshape in order to economize and sell your presentation? Essentially, the fundamental principle behind the elevator test requires that we understand and express the core of our message. It is critical to be both efficient and effective in our communication.

Locus of control

Another principle that is essential to a successful IIP is the appropriate balancing between presenter control and audience initiative. This principle mirrors Stevick (1980) who commented on the necessity for proper balance in the teacher and student relationship with respect to control and initiative. Too much teacher (presenter) control can stifle student (audience) initiative, while too little structure can create chaos. In our IIP model the presenter provides adequate control by providing: background on her topic; the framing question or theme she invites the audience to expand upon; and the organization of audience groupings and time limits. Having thus established a framework of control, in our experience, we have then noticed that teachers love to talk and take initiative wherever possible and will gladly run with most IIP ideas when given the chance.

Ownership and voice

In IIPs, all participants hold a stake in the ownership and development of the presentation. Although the presenter starts as the classic "holder of knowledge," imparting her wisdom to the proverbial empty vessels, it becomes abundantly clear that each person in the room can be considered a "knower" as he or she expresses their own definitions and interpretations of the topic. Under these conditions no one person owns the topic. Instead every person contributes to knowing the subject better, and ownership is collective. While this can be exciting, it should be noted that for the presenter this might also be a challenging time. For a start, the presenter has shifted from being an expert at center stage to being instantly invisible and having no influence over the proceedings. Furthermore, as the discussion grows organically, the participants may wander from the presenter's desired area of focus into different territories. They may reveal biases or blind spots in their knowledge and yet the presenter remains silent for the time being, simply listening. At the end of one IIP discussion period the presenter exclaimed: "There are so many misinterpretations of what I said!" Clearly presenters must cultivate an attitude of flexibility in order to avoid mislabeling audience discussions as wrong and to allow for the natural flow of the topic.

Deweying it!

Finally, John Dewey (1916) admonishes us to not *teach* Democracy (or other things) but to *do* it, enact it, experience it, in our classrooms. There is a long research tradition supporting active learning and experiential learning which

is captured in many proverbs such as: *Narau yori nareyo* ("Rather than just studying it, use it!"). Speaking at people for an extended period of time can turn them off or push them into parallel worlds.

Three discussion formats

The following three formats help to further structure and promote engaging and lively IIP discussions. Each has its own set of organizing principles in order to provide enough control for audience initiative to flourish. Furthermore, a facilitator takes responsibility for divulging the rationale behind each format and then organizes the group for maximum participation.

Talking 3s

Quite simply, in a Talking 3s discussion the audience is divided into smaller groups of three members per group. Audience members can then freely discuss the presentation or be given specific roles while discussing, similar to those in Cooperative Learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; 1994). For instance, members can assume such roles as: timer, questioner, participation encourager, to keep the group on-task, to summarize, and so on. We have found that, in a mini-conference forum with multiple IIPs, Talking 3s can be a useful and simple way to initially introduce newer participants to the style of IIPs.

Disney Strategy

In the Disney Strategy the audience is arranged into small groups of three or four members. Then for a short time (usually ranging from 5-10 minutes per round) they consider the presenter's idea as follows: first, they become *creators* and collectively imagine that anything is possible as they creatively brainstorm; second, they become *realists* and take the ideas from the creator zone and fashion them into a clear plan; and finally they become *critics*, whereupon they all act as devil's advocates and criticize the plan that was created in the realist zone. As time and interest permit, groups can cycle through the above steps repeatedly until a satisfactory plan is created.

Adopting these three distinct mindsets was a strategy that Walt Disney himself used with his collaborators in the making of his films, and it was later refined as a Neuro-Linguistic Programming technique (Bandler & Grinder, 1975; Dilts, 1995) for others to replicate. It can be a useful way to encourage people to be on the same page while pondering a mutually relevant theme or idea. To avoid the bleeding of one role into another, it is advisable, when changing roles, to actually move to a different place in the room, or at least change chairs.

Way of Council

In the Way of Council the audience participates as a whole in the form of a circle rather than in smaller groups as above. The focusing question is metaphorically contained in a talking piece (a small object such as a rock or stick that is passed around the circle of participants) that begins with

a facilitator (who is also a participant and thus an equal in the group). Each participant is encouraged beforehand and during the talk to be faithful to key communication principles that include: speaking from the heart (in other words, being spontaneous in speech), listening from the heart (being present and open to the other speakers in the circle), and being lean of expression (we encourage each member to speak for no more than 30 seconds each). Although any member in the group can speak or choose not to speak while holding the talking piece, they must also remain silent and engaged through their respectful attention to each speaker. Usually participants talk for one round but, based on time, audience numbers, and engagement, it is possible to do multiple rounds. In fact circulating again is encouraged as earlier speakers may wish to share something that was inspired by later speakers.

Since Council takes a "What is possible?" approach it is particularly relevant for structuring a whole group IIP discussion and tapping into its collective wisdom. The Way of Council has its roots in various cultures including Native American culture (Fujioka, 1998). In a skilled group of mutually respectful members it can be a profound opportunity to both speak and listen on deep levels.

Payback

Now that we have considered the various procedures of the IIP let us discuss in more detail the benefits for presenters and audience participants alike.

Presenter payback

Having invested time and energy in the initial research, the presenter naturally has a vested interest in the exchange of ideas which takes place. She may want to take notes while listening, in order to remember who said what and continue the discussion afterwards. These discussions during the IIP are important because they provide a snapshot of how other teachers/researchers view the presenter's chosen topic. The presenter can begin to understand what is important to her audience and why. If the presentation is to be given again, the snapshot can be used to adapt her future presentation to her audience's needs.

Clearly an IIP can be considered a potential gold mine of information for the presenter. If for example the title of the presentation is "How to humanize your classroom" then the presenter will hear a variety of definitions of the word "humanize" whilst circulating around the room. Despite the 5 minutes she took to define and explain the parameters of humanization, ultimately it is the participants who will define the keyword, each in the light of their own experience. This discussion, or rather restructuring of the topic, can provide the presenter with a wealth of information that she might never have found by herself.

Another way of saying this is to consider that the meaning of our communication is the response that we get. As Thomas Edison noted, novel responses to our efforts may not be the light bulb we wanted but nevertheless valuable in many unforeseen ways. Presenters also can gain access to valuable literature sources, potential research collaborators, and fresh perspectives. Like a fragmented Picasso, an IIP enables us to see new things in new ways and combinations.

Audience payback

A core belief in our pedagogies is that active learners learn more. In the traditional presentation format, the audience listens quietly and has only a small portion of time to raise questions. In a Q and A structure, audience participation is unequal and usually in favor of those who already have a basic understanding of the topic.

Talking with, tutoring, and listening to peers renders the exchange of information much more dynamic than listening to one person for an hour. Bateson (1994, p. 41) states that "participation precedes learning." This is supported by research in the U.S which shows students remember approximately 26% of what they hear, 70% of what they say and 90% of what they say and do (Silverman, 1987). Such information suggests that if we want the audience to maximize their learning, it is important that they be actively participating.

One reframe of the presenter/participant relationship is that the presenter is there simply to get the participants started on the selected topic. Because the presenter does not control the discussion, participants have the freedom to get a burning issue off their chests. To illustrate, at JALT2007 the presenters and participants made a circle with their chairs for a Way of Council. The topic was "What would you most like other people at your institution to learn about?" Some participants spoke of teacher needs, others of student needs. One lady, with tears welling up in her eyes, hoped people in her context would learn more Japanese to facilitate smoother communication so that all could understand each other.

Through taking ownership of the discussion, participants have the opportunity to talk about issues of importance to them that may otherwise be left untouched in the short Q and A session of a traditional presentation. This democratic way of structuring presentations allows people to reflect upon what fascinates, angers, confuses or inspires them.

Caveat

An IIP almost never goes according to plan – it is more like jazz musicians jamming (and we hope you have noticed that jazz groups have no conductor!) You bring some good people together and let them explore their thinking – you jam. Sometimes we hear some flat notes, sometimes people take us to places we did not think we would go. As a presenter, when you can say to yourself, "Whatever happens will be interesting" and "I am not controlling this, it is a group construction" then you have prepared yourself somewhat for the adventure. And when someone does say a "show stopper," you can respond with, "That's interesting, what do the rest of you think?" In other words, while you are responsible for organizing the presentation to a degree, the organizing structure encourages group structuring, so you can always go back to the group as a resource – let others lead. It has been our experience, in fact, that teachers do not like to listen a lot at presentations – they want to interact and express themselves.

Conclusion

To summarize, the presenter of an IIP follows these 5 steps:

1. Research a topic

2. Give a succinct presentation

3. Organize a participation format

4. Listen and gather more information

5. Let the new information contribute to further research, e.g., future presentations, papers, classroom activities, etc.

As we can see, this is a cyclical process where steps 1 and 5 come full circle. Although at step 4 the presenter relinquishes control, this is also the time when so many genuine, "live" research opportunities occur.

In conclusion an IIP opens us up to the perspectives of others – the social capital in any group – their ideas and emotions regarding an issue in the world. For the presenter it is a refreshing and edifying way to present and gather research. Certainly, more traditional style presentations have their place in academia. At the same time, there can be many advantages for both presenters and participants of IIPs that may warrant a re-examination and challenging of traditional presentations.

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