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Dodging the Damocletian sword of academic oral presentations

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Most university students in Australia are required to give at least one oral presentation during their courses, and this can be particularly daunting for international students for whom English is not a first language. It has been suggested that watching a successful peer model can not only provide students with advice but actually improve their confidence in delivery. Using the peer modelling idea as a basis, I translated theory into practice by making a DVD aimed particularly at international students, but with wider application for all tertiary students. This DVD is a novelty, since there is no similar resource available specifically targeting international students at Australian universities. The DVD is designed as a teaching tool and features a simulated seminar setting, with examples of good and poor presentations, a commentary and accompanying booklets. The resource has been successfully used with local and international students by lecturers at Flinders University, and there are now plans to market the DVD to other universities in Australia and overseas.

Keywords: oral presentation; international students; DVD

Introduction

In ancient history, the Sword of Damocles was a potent symbolic reminder of possible peril. This sword still dangles metaphorically over university students who know that at some stage in their academic career they will be asked to give an oral presentation (Morita, 2000). They feel its presence, and look for something to counteract its sweat-inducing terror and knee-jellying nightmares. The greatest fear of giving a presentation occurs once the assignment has been announced (Witt & Behnke, 2006), suggesting that preparation is essential to counteract this anxiety. Non-native speakers of English in particular frequently lack confidence when giving a presentation (Ferris, 1998), as they are often concerned at their lack of linguistic ability or familiarity with academic discourse (Morita, 2000), although, as Morita (2000) has indicated, lack of language ability does not impair the overall success of a presentation.

Teachers prepare students for presentations in many ways, and one of the most valuable of these is by using visual aids with actual examples. The value of watching examples, particularly those given by peers, is supported by research into the effect of peer modelling of students' self-efficacy in oral presentation (Adams, 2004). Chanock (2005) also reports that students watching seminar presentations related more closely to a presentation given by a graduate student, rather than those delivered by lecturers.

As a teacher of oral presentation skills to international postgraduate students, I tried to find a suitable resource which would address the importance of preparation, structure, effective use of PowerPoint slides and relevant handouts. However, I was unable to find a resource aimed specifically at international students in an Australian university context. Although business resources, such as *I wasn't prepared for that*, starring Dawn French, were entertaining and

professionally produced, they were very expensive and aimed at a corporate market. This means that the content was not entirely relevant, the style of presentation was not academic and the setting was usually a board meeting or corporate function.

After reading Adams' (2004) article, I determined to translate theory into practice, and applied for, and was awarded, a Flinders University Teaching and Learning Innovation Grant in November 2005. The grant enabled me to produce a resource filmed with professional equipment (namely a Sony High Definition video camera (model HDW-F900), with a High Definition Fujinon lens), with the services and expertise of a professional filmmaker and editor. The process took a total of 18 months to complete, from the making of a pilot video with a more basic camera from the Flinders University Multimedia Technology Unit to the copying of the final version of the improved DVD. This new resource, while meeting the needs of international postgraduate students, has a much larger application and has proved to be suitable for students of any level and background at Australian and other universities. The paper that follows documents the process involved in making the DVD and the outcomes achieved to date.

The DVD participants

The lead actors in the DVD were recruited by personal invitation and the audience was recruited by general invitation during an intensive academic skills course and an Orientation Week lecture. Three main actors featured in both the pilot and the DVD. These were a young local male student, who gave the poor presentation; a mature age female African international student, who gave the good presentation; and myself, in the role of host. A staff member from the Student Learning Centre played the role of seminar facilitator. The two presenters had to talk for five minutes each in front of an audience of their peers, using PowerPoint and handouts. The male presenter was chosen because of his comic acting ability and the female presenter because she had already produced a good presentation and was willing to participate in the filming process. Since gender has not been found to make a difference to perceived speaker competence (Sellnow & Treinen, 2004), the allocation of male and female roles in the DVD should not have influenced students' perceptions of competency. The audience comprised 16 local and international students, male and female, aged from 17 to about 40. The second audience was different to the pilot audience, since some of the first students involved had returned to their home countries before the DVD was filmed. In recruiting students for the audience I hoped to have a mix of nationalities and ages and was largely successful in this, except for a shortage of response among local students. When the DVD was complete, a copy was given to each participant, together with a certificate of participation.

The DVD content

The DVD package was designed as a teaching tool aimed particularly at tertiary lecturers working with university students, though it could also be used in a TAFE setting. The package features a DVD, teacher's booklet and photocopiable student handout. The DVD starts with a brief voice-over introduction to the Student Learning Centre at Flinders University, providing a context and background which set the resource in an academic environment. This is followed by an introduction to the content of the DVD, with the camera entering a seminar room where several students are waiting for a session to begin. A lecturer introduces the first speaker, Daniel, who arrives late, still eating a sandwich and looking generally dishevelled. Daniel then proceeds to make the classic mistakes associated with a

poor presentation. These are listed separately in the teacher's handbook under the headings of PowerPoint, Presenter, Content and Handout (see Appendix 1). The main problem with Daniel's talk about the French and Russian revolutions is that he is unprepared. He does not know his subject (substituting 17X9 for 1789 on the handout and PowerPoint slide, for example), does not know how to use the technology, stops to answer his mobile phone during the talk and has little structure or coherence to his presentation. His final slide is an annoying series of 'Thank you' graphics accompanied by clapping sounds. Following Daniel's presentation, Prisca is introduced and proceeds to give a well prepared talk on transformational leadership. Prisca is dressed informally but neatly, her slides and handout are appropriate, she engages her audience and she knows her subject well. Her talk is accompanied by a voice-over commentary which highlights the main features, fading in and out as she speaks, with the acronym PREPARE appearing gradually as a graphic on the screen. The acronym indicates that a good speaker should be Purposeful, Relevant, Enthusiastic, Proficient, Academic, Reliable and Engaging. At the end of the DVD the main points of successful presentations are again summarised, and there is a final shot with a different view of Flinders University, with the credits. Both the opening and closing shots are accompanied by music composed by a first year university student.

Accompanying booklets

The teacher's handout has an attractively coloured cover, with photographs of Flinders University on the front and back. The remainder of the booklet is printed in black and white. Inside, the aims of the DVD are clearly explained, followed by suggested plans for a one hour or two hour lesson. The problems with the poor presentation are listed and a feedback sheet for presentations is provided at the end. It is suggested that use of the DVD be followed by the opportunity for students to prepare and deliver a one minute talk. Many students have commented on the usefulness of this exercise, allowing them to speak very briefly and overcome some of their initial stage fright in front of a sympathetic audience. A peer feedback sheet that could be used at this point is also provided, highlighting two positive features and one feature for further practice. This stage of the lesson depends very much on the number of students in the group, but is a very useful part of the session.

The student handout is a photocopyable, black and white booklet. The cover features a still from the DVD. Inside, there are reproductions of the two students' handouts as well as a checklist for students to complete as they watch the first presentation, assessing presenter, content, PowerPoint slides and handout as good, fair or poor (see Appendix 2). The PREPARE acronym is also elaborated. Advice is given about the use of overhead transparencies and PowerPoint, followed by questions for students to work through in regard to their own forthcoming presentations and some advice about overcoming nervousness.

Limitations

Although there was a generous budget for the DVD (\$10,000), most of this was taken up by the filming and editing. This means that it is hard to make adjustments to the final copy. It has been suggested, for example, that a version of the good presentation be included without the voice-over commentary as an extra chapter in the DVD. While this would be helpful, it has not proved affordable.

Recommendations

For anyone aiming to produce an electronic resource, I would recommend working with a local filmmaker. The filmmaker I used was a friend from interstate, which meant that I accessed expertise and equipment that were probably beyond my budget, but communication was difficult. In terms of packaging, although the teacher's manual and student book were originally designed to fit inside the DVD case, the student book is very hard to photocopy in this size, so later editions will be made simply as an A4 booklet, entailing a different style of packaging.

Conclusion

The DVD has been enthusiastically accepted by Flinders University staff and students, suggesting the need for this type of resource and the success with which theory can be translated into a meaningful student experience. As teaching methods change and develop, it is timely to consider the use of technology and alternative methods of delivery. The knowledge I have gained through producing the DVD will, I hope, be translated into a wider context, and ideas are already being gathered for an amusing but informative DVD on the subject of academic writing and referencing. That such resources should be developed in Australia is a challenge and encouragement to all of us involved in higher education.

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Appendix 1: Problems with the poor presentation

PowerPoint

Size of font
Colour of font
Spelling
Punctuation
Capitalisation
Inappropriateness of images, and mistakes with flags
No acknowledgement of where flags are from
Ignorance of how to use technology
Inappropriate background
Annoying final slide

Presenter

Untidily dressed
Arrives still eating a sandwich
Starts with an apology
Reads whole paragraph from slide
Unrehearsed – cannot pronounce names
Bad timing – goes over time
Eye contact avoided or overdone
Mobile phone should be turned off
Does not understand content
Does not relate to audience
Speaks with his back to the audience
Stands in front of the projector
Speaks too quickly at times
Boring
Ill-equipped – asks for a tape recorder which is not there

Content

No background or introduction to talk
No links or structure
Main points not identified
Unclear – who or what is he talking about?
Inaccurate and uninformed – 17X9 instead of 1789
Pictures may be insulting to French and Russians
Wrong flags (not French, but Luxembourgish. Russian not appropriate to revolution)
Informal language
Plagiarism and lack of references

Handout

Irrelevant
Non-academic style
Totally uninformative
Untidy – folded up in his pocket
Not enough copies

Appendix 2 - Presentation 1 Assessment

Presenter	Excellent	Satisfactory	Poor
Pleasant manner			
Confidence			
Use of slides			
Knowledge of subject			
Use of notes			
Timing			
Eye contact			
Response to questions			
Avoidance of unnecessary interruptions			
Fluency			
Volume			
Speed			
Engagement with topic			
Humour			
Content			
Introduction			
Structure and links			
Identification of main points			
Clarity			
Accuracy			
Originality of material			
Appropriateness of language			
PowerPoint			
Size of font			
Colour of font			
Background of slides			
Spelling			
Punctuation			
Capitalisation			
Overall effect			
Use of sound			
Use of images			
Use of technology			
Handout			
Relevance			
Academic style			
Usefulness			