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New Perspectives in Leadership

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Public Speaking

Leo S. Lo

"I dropped out of college because I didn't want to take that required public speaking class," I told the table of attendees during the 2013 ALA Midwinter LLAMA/NMRT New Leaders Discussion Group. The title of the session was "Speak Up: Developing Effective Public Speaking Skills."

Every table was full at this LLAMA/NMRT New Leaders Discussion Group meeting. The Discussion Group is a collaborative effort between LLAMA and New Members Round Table (NMRT), designed to bring together new librarians, library school students and experienced librarians for discussions of leadership topics. This was the most highly attended session since we started the group in 2011. The high participation rate was actually not that surprising, as according to a national survey study, public speaking is the most common lifetime social fear in America.¹ From the feedback we received from previous Discussion Group attendees, we were expecting a lot of interest in developing this skill set among newer librarians. However, what we did not expect was the high turnout of seasoned professionals. At previous LLAMA/NMRT joint Discussion Groups, most of the attendees were newer professionals (i.e. NMRT members), but this session had an approximately equal ratio of new and experienced librarians. We were delighted to see among them many established leaders coming to share their wisdom. For example, my table included such accomplished public speakers as LLAMA Past-President Janine Golden and ACRL President-Elect Steven Bell. On the other hand, we noticed that even librarians in leadership positions felt the need to further develop their public speaking skills. Many of them confessed that public speaking, in its myriad of forms (giving formal presentations, speaking up in meetings, teaching in a classroom, etc.), still filled them with anxiety.

The three excellent discussion starters presented on their own experiences of overcoming the fear of public speaking. Annie Pho from the University of Illinois-Chicago shared her tips regarding how to overcome introversion and develop public speaking skills in her presentation titled, "Stay Calm and Keep Talking." Megan Watson from the University of Washington-Bothell covered how to take stock of and draw on existing skills and previous experience in order to become a successful public speaker in her talk "All I Really Need to Know, I Learned In... ." Manuel Urrizola from the University of California-Riverside delivered a crowd-pleasing presentation entitled "Show What You Mean," which covered the elements of skillful speaking and effective communication, especially on how to communicate verbally, vocally, and visually.

I couldn't help but compare their experiences to my own. Although there were other reasons why I dropped out of college with only two classes left, it was absolutely true that I dreaded that public speaking course so much that I would do just about anything to avoid it. The thought of having to give presentations in front of the whole class made me want to curl up in a fetal position under a heavy duvet. The ironic thing is, I actually love presenting now. I have many goals in my life, and one of them is to give a brilliant, Ted Talk-caliber presentation.

There are already many excellent books and articles out there that teach you how to improve public speaking or presentation skills. The goal of this article is not to focus on the craft of presenting, but rather to share my path of transforming from being deathly afraid of giving presentations to actually enjoy doing it. There are two important turning points in my change of attitude.

What is the point of a presentation?

Sometimes we forget why we give presentations in the first place. In order to feel comfortable presenting, it is absolutely necessary to know exactly *why* you are doing it. Simon Sinek gave an excellent presentation at a Ted Talk² about the importance of “why” and writes about it in his book, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*.³ Having a sense of purpose applies not only to being a leader, but also to presenting, and to almost every action in life. It would not be an exaggeration to say that my life has changed after realizing this. I sat down and thought deeply about my own sense of purpose, both professionally and personally, and came up with my own personal strategic plan.⁴ I encourage you to do the same. Once I am able to clearly articulate my life purpose, then everything else comes into focus. Having a direction focuses your effort to the most important things. When applied to presenting, it is much easier and less scary when you know why you are doing it.

The point of giving a presentation is of course to communicate with the audience, whether it is to share, to inspire, to motivate, or to persuade. It sounds obvious, but when we feel anxious, it is easy to think of it as just a chore we have to get through. Notice the different emphasis in the two attitudes. One places the emphasis on *the audience*, while the other is on *us, the presenters*. If we start out knowing the true purpose of giving a presentation is to communicate with the audience, then everything we do will be to make sure that that happens. On the other hand, if we place the emphasis on us simply getting through it, it is unlikely the resulting presentation will engage the audience. Think about all those presentations that were unenthusiastic, uninspiring, and unengaging that you have sat through. How did you feel as an audience? Did you retain any useful information from them apart from the sub-par quality of the presentations? Why did you feel that way? The one commonality of these presentations always is that the presenters did not place communicating with the audience as their number one priority when developing their presentations. The emphasis of those presentations is inevitably on the content. While it is important, having the greatest content in the world means nothing if the audience were not engaged enough to receive it. It is only when we truly understand why we want present that we would genuinely be motivated to improve our skills.

Storytelling

It is not a secret that storytelling is an effective way to engage your audience, and therefore is a great tool to have in order to become a good presenter. The problem is that you cannot just become a good storyteller overnight. Telling stories in front of strangers is a scary and vulnerable prospect for a lot of people. Learning to tell stories, however, is well worth the effort. Even more than the ability to tell good stories, I believe that the process of learning how to tell stories is even more important. Natural storytellers, those who do not need to learn to be good, are actually missing out on developing important skills.

Before I became a librarian, I wanted to be a film scholar. All I wanted to do was watch films and then write about them. That seemed like a perfect career for a film buff, so logically, I enrolled in a graduate program in film studies. The problem arose when it was time to take the mandatory creative writing class - a screenwriting workshop class, in which you read your writing, often in imperfect draft form, out loud. On top of that, your classmates critique your work right there and then. Having not done any

creative writing ever before, I dreaded that class, because not only would I have to talk a lot in class, I had to share my most personal feelings, emotions, and vulnerability - my stories. It was a nerve-wrecking experience. It took me a long while to really let go and be myself in the workshop. While we have limited power to change the external events around us, we have all the power to interpret their meanings, and it is this power that shapes our lives. So instead of seeing the class as negative chore that I had to get through to get my degree, I finally saw it as a valuable learning opportunity. Once my attitude changed, the whole experience changed. By the end of the semester, I enjoyed creative writing so much that I switched my M.A. degree to an M.F.A. in Screenwriting!

My workshop experience in my M.F.A. program has a direct effect on my transformation from being scared of speaking in public to loving it. In fact, I believe that taking a screenwriting workshop class is one of the best ways to become a better presenter. First of all, you learn how to tell a story, and how to engage your readers/audience. In the Harvard Business Review Blog article, "MFA is the new MBA",⁵ Katherine Bell explains, "Good fiction writers know how to involve readers in acts of collaborative imagination. Readers like to be challenged...They like to feel smart and creative and listened to." This could easily apply to giving presentations.

Secondly, in a writing workshop, you learn how to fail in front of people because you will be reading the draft of your stories out loud. More often than not, the flaws will be pointed out to you in front of the whole class. But once you have failed a few times in front of people, you are no longer afraid of it. This, I believe, is the most valuable aspect of being a good leader, a good presenter, and a good storyteller. This might seem scary at first, but a writing workshop is usually a very safe, and supportive environment to fail in.

Thirdly, by sharing your stories in class, you get the instant public recognition of your work. You get the laughter, the nods, the smiles. These are the addictive factors that make performers perform, and why many people like to present. I will always remember the feeling I had the first time I got a big laugh from my story, or the first time I got a genuinely enthusiastic applause after my presentation. These are the rewards of communicating with the audience, and these are reasons why I have learned to stop worrying and love public speaking.

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