Communicative Efficacy and the Issue of "Self-performance" in the Cross-disciplinary Research Presentations Classroom

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It is common, accurate and serves a practical purpose to regard presentations as a kind of performance. Indeed, in teaching presentations we may highlight their performative nature in order to inspire dynamic and engaged delivery. This paper examines, however, how an overemphasis upon conventions of performance, particularly where it is aimed at projecting what is perceived as an "impression" deemed appropriate to a research discipline, may be responsible for some failures of communication in presentations. Cross-disciplinary courses in research presentation skills are shown to provide an especially fertile context for exploring, understanding and imparting awareness of this. Given the unique and considerable challenges posed by sharing research across disciplines, a cross-disciplinary research presentation course foregrounds the issue of communication efficacy to a quite extraordinary degree. For the author, this raises questions about the factors informing research presenters' decisions in preparing and delivering their presentations. Based on experiences in classes, research on presentation skills, along with discussions of the contested notion of "performance," it is argued that it may be helpful to students for teachers to articulate a practical distinction between the projection of one's disciplinary identity as a research scholar and effective communication of research content to an audience. But how does one draw that practical distinction without immersing students in the semantic fluidity of the term "performance" or philosophical controversies surrounding the function of performance in social being? It is suggested that contained within the dense and abstruse pages of existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* there may be a useful analogue.

Conducting a course in the techniques of research presentations is a rewarding pedagogical task. While it may be time consuming, helping students prepare their presentations for the class and giving them detailed feedback afterward seem less of a burden when one keeps in mind that this process is helping them to better communicate their research to others and conceivably thereby not only improve their work but benefit the world. Conversely, if that communication fails, those valuable ideas may not reach their audience or may not receive the constructive feedback they need to ensure improvement. This paper, itself given initially as an oral presentation, is an attempt to make a modest contribution to the pedagogy of presentations. My aims are essentially practical, yet the discussion that follows eventually enters rather philosophical territory when it attempts to articulate what I have come to regard as a potentially useful distinction between two overlapping but at times competing aspects of presentations. While acutely conscious of the semantic minefield use of such fluid and sometimes contentious terms exposes, I refer to these two dimensions as the self-performative and the communicative. I will suggest that where teaching presentations to researchers is concerned there may be pedagogical benefits in such delineation and in attempting to ensure that communication is not overwhelmed by self-performance (as I define it). Before explicating my usage and application of those terms, however, let me first provide some background on the specific teaching context in which this particular dichotomy has emerged for me and how teaching cross-disciplinary presentations classes has generated special challenges and insights.

I teach two semester-long courses in presentation skills open to researchers at my university, including graduate school students (which accounts for the overwhelming majority), academic staff and formally designated researchers such as postdoctoral fellows. Since the university places great emphasis upon research output, we are catering to a quite large, motivated and diverse population. That diversity is an absolutely crucial issue for those of us working in the area because it refers not only to the multiple research fields of participants in the classes but also broader cross-cultural differences. As the university is in Japan, it is not surprising that generally at least half of the students are Japanese, but there is a substantial foreign

student and researcher population. In the class conducted in the Fall semester of 2016, for instance, there were, along with the Japanese, students from China, Indonesia, Korea, Myanmar, Peru, Taiwan and Thailand attending. It is also important to note in light of the discussion of communication to follow that the course is conducted in English. Those who attend are generally seeking not only to further their presentation skills but to acquire experience and confidence in presenting in English for envisaged international conference situations, often at the behest or at least with the encouragement of their research supervisors.

In the class mentioned above, the 19 students were from the following nine fields: bioagriculture, cultural studies, economics, education, engineering, law, linguistics, medicine and nursing. That range is quite typical and is the single greatest challenge I face with my two colleagues in running presentation courses. Very disparate fields are represented here, with different ways of both researching and presenting research, and diverse technical vocabularies. The difference is further complicated by the fact that all, or almost all, of the students are operating in their second or third language, English, limiting the available vocabulary and thus the capacity to take the cognitive leap across fields. That is a significant problem because the students, along with the teacher, serve as the audience during the important presentation practices done in class. How can students serve as useful audience members and participate constructively in what should be valuable Q and A practice for the presenter when they lack the technical knowledge, vocabulary and confidence to do so? A short credible answer would be, "They can't. Or not very well." This might lead to the conclusion that it would make good sense to offer courses directed to specific fields or at least to groups of fields that share research methodological conventions and to some degree vocabularies: for example, separate courses for physical sciences, biological sciences and humanities. In fact, we have not dismissed that option, but something has emerged in the process of running the presentation courses causing hesitancy – not so much a problem, as the countervailing benefits of running the courses across research fields as we do: the very fact of their cross-disciplinarity.

I use the term "cross-disciplinary" instead of "multidisciplinary" or "interdisciplinary" in order to avoid making excessive claims for what our presentation courses do. Our mission is to facilitate the development of specific fundamental skills for use in any field – across disciplines. It is not *primarily* to expand students' knowledge of various discrete disciplines (multidisciplinarity) or to foster "conjunctive interaction" between them (interdisciplinarity) (Ellis 2009, 7). In other words, our primary role is not to raise economists' awareness of astrophysics or to bring the skills of literary studies to bear on research in fluid dynamics. Nevertheless, students in the presentation courses are being exposed quite directly to research and researchers in other fields, and this in itself is almost certainly valuable experience. With the so-called "knowledge explosion," those engaged in educational policy have become increasingly aware of the dangers of over-specialization: "A profound increase in the number of specialties and fields has exacerbated the problem of fragmentation, accelerating calls for connection-making" (Klein 2005, 9). The cross-disciplinary presentation courses do raise awareness of other research fields and of the desirability of such connection. They also, by necessity, bring to light shared foundations that are not always obvious to the researchers themselves. Carolin Kreber argues that "similarities exist across disciplines in the thinking processes developed" (2010, 46), something that the presentation courses must emphasize from the beginning. For instance, the so-called "hard sciences" have their standard IMRaD (Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion) structure for journal articles and presentations that might seem far removed from the discursive modes often identified with the humanities; yet, closer study reveals that each of the IMRaD elements is often present or implied in the humanities albeit to different degrees, with the method being dealt with very briefly and results being encapsulated in a very extensive discussion. Most importantly, researchers across the disciplines are generally attempting to support an idea, a thesis or hypothesis, through a logical organization of evidence. Drawing attention to that shared foundation is not only helpful for the development of a more interdisciplinary consciousness in researchers but useful for the effective operation of the presentation courses themselves.

Now, let me move to a specific benefit of cross-disciplinary presentation courses that, while probably obvious to many educators, has only become clearly apparent to me through the practice – usually a matter

of endless trial and considerable error – of running such courses. This is where the notion of a distinction between self-performance and communication comes to the fore. Recollection of a memorable pedagogical event, almost an epiphanic moment, would provide the most efficient introduction. I was viewing an engineering student's slides as he prepared to give a presentation in class. (He was Chinese, but I should say at the outset that in the specific area of practice I am referring to, cross-cultural differences seem to be less significant than disciplinary differences, perhaps because all participants are researching or studying in a Japanese university.) His opening slide was on the whole comprehensible except for one two-word expression for which I understood both words but not the apparent collocation. He explained to me this was the commonly used term in his research field. I said I understood that and it would be fine to use it once he had explained what it meant, but for the sake of the audience (who were already going to be struggling with the language and concepts) couldn't he use a more common expression with basically the same meaning on the opening slide just to avoid alienating the audience? He said this: "I don't want to do that. It doesn't look professional." I replied that his view would certainly make sense while presenting to others in his laboratory who were familiar with the term or would soon grasp it – in fact, in that context it is efficient and desirable use of technical vocabulary – but perhaps for the non-specialist audience of the presentations class it would reduce the chance of misunderstanding and be more likely to engage them if he used a more familiar expression. I left it at that and he kept his slide as it was.

The upside to the story is that I learned something from this exchange (apparently more than the student did). It relates to that sentence, "It doesn't look professional," because it made me more fully cognizant of something I had sensed intuitively and occasionally read allusions to but which is generally not extensively or deeply examined in texts on presentation skills. Presenters are quite often not principally concerned with the effectiveness of their presentation in terms of the fundamentally practical goals of imparting their ideas and receiving useful feedback; they may actually be more seriously focused on the generation of what might be called a "general impression." In this context "impression" does not mean positive impact – it could be a very mundane and even deliberately boring impression – but appears to be the coalescence of a set of formal signifying elements deemed appropriate in terms of vaguely defined yet powerful disciplinary forces. I mean "disciplinary" in two senses here – indicating both an academic field and the conditioning of behavior within that field. In that way the presentation is conceived and delivered in a sense as a form of "performance" in the theatrical sense, in what actually amounts to a highly convention-driven form of theater. I was led from here to an investigation of the terms "performance" and "performativity" which uncovered important insights by the philosopher of language John L. Austin that would be taken up by poststructuralists such as Derrida and further complicated by Judith Butler in relation to gender identity. I realized I was veering into a fascinating area of linguistic philosophical controversy from which I might never return or recover.

Because my goals are practical, I don't wish to enter the philosophical debate as to the extent to which all discourse might be considered "performative" according to a certain definition of the term (Derrida) or the degree to which "performance" should be distinguished from "performativity" (Butler). For the present, practical and limited, purpose it should suffice to refer to the notion that utterances implicate the speaker in a social theater in which characters and even back-stories may be formed in those who witness them. Sociologist Erving Goffman writes that in speaking "the individual plays a part" and "he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess" (1969, 17). This is taken from the influential book *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* and could provide some insight into the aforementioned student's concern to "look professional." Although he had probably never read Goffman, perhaps he intuitively felt that in presenting his research he was presenting *himself* and that he should play his role according to disciplinary theatrical conventions commonly identified through the word "professional." The problem of audience incomprehension that arose from his disciplinary role-playing in the cross-disciplinary context exposed (at least for me) those conventions and the communicative difficulties they can generate. This, if we can make it apparent to the researchers, may be another important benefit of placing them in the cross-disciplinary context. It draws attention to problems caused by performing *oneself*,

one's disciplinary *role*, through presenting. It is probably inevitable that the speaker and audience construct identities, and that researchers pursuing long-term careers may have good reason to feel there is much at stake in projecting a "professional mien," but is there a way to prevent pursuit of the self-performance from impeding communication of "content" and a practical way to impart it to students?

To bring the discussion out of abstraction and into the concrete practice of research presentations, let me quote the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Here, amidst a very long and abstruse philosophical work, Sartre refers to his own experience while sitting in a French café and observing a waiter, which brings to mind, just a little, the "professional" engineer presenter.

> His [the waiter's] movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other, his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms, he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it; he is playing *at being* a waiter in a café. (Sartre 1956, 101-2)

The point is the waiter is not simply doing what needs to be done as efficiently and effectively as possible but performing the role of being a waiter. It occurred to me this is what many of us, including myself, tend to do to more or less degrees while presenting research: thinking a little too much about the impression being projected to the detriment of efficacy. What's more, this is arguably less defensible for researchers than for waiters since, whereas the café patrons may enjoy and even be flattered by the waiter's performance, surely researchers should seek to impart information and receive feedback with minimal waste, not be engaged in real-life RPG's (role playing games) with each other's time and the university or taxpayers' money. Sartre does not consider the performativity of the waiter to be either admirable or inevitable: in fact, he offers it as an example of what he calls "bad faith," a flight from existential freedom and responsibility into conscious simulation, even dissimulation.

We don't need to follow Sartre in pursuing the question of existential authenticity here, only ask if Sartre's observations are credible and usefully applicable where an apparently performed professionalism in research presentations is concerned. I think they are. But it gets complicated, because part of the research presenter's performance (perhaps especially if they are operating within scientific disciplines) is the performance of efficiency: not simply to *be* efficient but to give an *impression* of efficiency (not to perform efficiently but to perform "efficiency"), much as Sartre's waiter does through actions that are "a little too precise, a little too rapid." In the context of a research presentation, one might think of presenters giving themselves "the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things" through a too brief display of information, an excess of detail, a display of data beyond that required to support the central thesis of the research within the constraints of audience comprehension and a time-limited presentation. This has often been identified as a serious, common fault in presentations and has sometimes been ascribed the term, borrowed from computing, "data dumping" (See Weissman 2013). Communicative efficacy is subordinated to performative effect.

A recurring difficulty I have in advising students, and this perhaps applies no less to those in the humanities than in the sciences, is convincing them to reduce the amount of information, whether text or images such as graphs and diagrams, on slides. Why not cut some of this or transfer it to supplementary handouts? Why not use 3 or 4 slides instead of making the material illegible in order to squeeze it onto a single slide? More than one student has told me they have actually been advised by their supervisor or senior

colleague to compress material, to reduce white space on slides, quite at odds with the bulk of contemporary slide design literature I have read (See for instance Reynolds 2008, 146 and Duarte 2008, 106). An explicit reason for increasing the density of information on slides is not given and it makes no practical sense. It does make sense, however, as theater: the performance of intellectual seriousness and rigor (detail), the performance of efficiency (compression).

The problem in that case is the audience's capacity to understand the content, but it is not always clear that audience comprehension has been considered seriously, if at all, in the presentation structuring and design process. Often the main concern is imitation of familiar disciplinary conventions: that desired general impression to be given to the audience seems to be granted priority over the intelligibility of the content, the communicative efficacy. I do not have hard data to determine whether this is particularly prevalent in Japanese university presentations, but if it were I believe (based on my frequent attendance at international conferences in various disciplines) that it would be a matter of degree. In fact, it is likely in order to address this phenomenon that Wallwork, from a European context, writes in a book on giving research presentations, "A 'professional' presentation is one where you put the audience first. You think about how the audience would most like to receive the information you are giving" (Wallwork 2010, vii). It is significant that Wallwork uses the term "professional" and applies it not to the presenter but to the presentation. A presentation is to some degree a performance, but there appear to be degrees of performativity, and while a presenter is likely to be "identified" by the audience through a presentation, presenting need not be above all about what Goffman referred to as presenting the self. It can be about both, but it probably shouldn't be more about the waiter than the coffee.

Viewing presentations in this way may allow us to elucidate for students an underlying problem rather than just the individual symptoms of poor presentation – such as the excessive detail causing comprehension difficulties and timing problems, or the overly complex vocabulary. An added benefit of drawing this distinction, conceivably, is that by shifting the focus from the self to the communication of content the speaker may be relieved somewhat of the sense of self-exposure and vulnerability which produces potentially crippling nervousness not just among non-native speakers or researchers but anyone speaking in public. But is there a downside? If we deemphasize a certain "performative" (in the sense of theatrical) element of presenting, what will happen to elements such as body language, gesturing, eye contact or voice modulation that are staples of public speaking instruction? Firstly, my point is only regarding a certain performative dimension (performance of the self), and what is being advanced is a question of de-emphasis, not exclusion. Secondly, although it is beyond the scope of the present paper, it would seem unlikely that the causes of weaknesses in the areas of body language and voice modulation are reducible to lack of conscious attention to performance. Arguably, other aspects contributing to limited body language in some cases may be cultural conditioning and context. Nervousness would also seem to play a role: as mentioned above, over-attention to the performance of the self may increase the sense of vulnerability, thereby defensively restricting bodily and vocal expression.

Furthermore, and perhaps most interestingly (although it requires much more data and analysis on my part), I have noticed that speakers' paralinguistic and bodily expression often become both more animated and more conversationally "natural" during question time, possibly because they are brought into a more comfortable dialogically communicative context. This is perhaps because, in the language of dramatic theory, the fourth wall separating the actor from the audience is removed, undermining their status as performer. If that is the case, it should be helpful to emphasize the dialogic, conversational, aspect of presentations as a whole to remove or lower that fourth wall. This raises a related point likewise worthy of further investigation, the possibility that restriction of vocal and bodily expression by research presenters may itself be to some extent performance – even deliberately – a meaningful minimalism. That is, the presenter may be limiting physical movement or using a relatively flat or repetitive vocal cadence not simply from lack of confidence or preparation but in part in order to enact a performance of emotional detachment considered appropriate to the role of "objective researcher."

To conclude, let me be clear: I am not at all advocating the removal of the concept of performance from

presentation skill development: in a sense, quite the opposite. The aim here has only been to suggest, based on cross-disciplinary presentation classes where issues of communicability become especially critical, the value of asking students the following: are the decisions they make in preparing and delivering presentations based primarily on a practical desire for effective communication or upon a felt need to generate an impression deemed appropriate to their discipline? And is it possible that the latter, though not necessarily harmful in itself, may be adversely affecting the former? I have no intention of acquainting students in depth with the various definitions of "performance," with performance theories, or with the ongoing debates of linguistic philosophy to do that, although I am about to try the Sartre story as a concrete example of the potentially problematic effects of an overemphasis on performing the self. At the same time I think I should spend a little more time and place greater emphasis on the instrumental function of research presentations as a means not just to display an achievement but to gather feedback that will be useful for the strengthening of the research. This is of course applicable to presentations within as well as across disciplines, but I do think that the cross-disciplinary presentations classroom may provide an excellent environment in which to make the case for communication over self-performance precisely because of the various and considerable communicative challenges it places before the presenter.

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