A Comedy of Errors: Teaching Oral Presentation Skills Using a Spectacularly Bad Presentation

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Abstract – Oral presentation skills are viewed as one of the critical outcomes required for ABET accreditation. When recently charged with teaching oral presentation skills to students in the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga's "Introduction to Design" freshman level-class, as well as to the senior-level Computer Engineering capstone design class, the professor could have used the most straightforward method: to simply give students a list of expectations and a rubric by which oral presentations would be judged. However, the author chose to demonstrate all that an oral presentation should *not* be by giving a spectacularly bad presentation, including over forty errors in viewgraphs and in physical presentation. The students were required to generate a list of all errors of both types, which were then discussed in class, and used to create a rubric by which student presentations would be graded.

Keywords: Oral presentations, Teaching methods

INTRODUCTION

The ability to make effective oral presentations can be critical to an engineer's career, as no matter how excellent one's ideas are, unless they can be communicated, at least to one's immediate superior, they have little chance of successful implementation. There are a variety of approaches to teaching oral presentation skills, ranging from full semester-length speech courses to brief coverage in other courses requiring oral presentations. Many engineering programs incorporate discussion and practice of presentation skills into their capstone design projects or courses. Books used as texts in design courses, such as *Fundamentals of Engineering Design* [1], often include a brief discussion and a list of rules as to what a good presentation should, and should not, include. Numerous papers have been presented at engineering and education related conferences giving different methods or emphases for teaching students to present well, including using staff meetings as a model to teach oral presentations [2], use of specially developed modules that allow students to progressively improve skills [3], and use of new technologies to allow students to both develop and assess their oral presentation efforts [4].

However, in spite of the number and variety of resources on developing good presentation skills, there is no definitive agreement on exactly what a good oral presentation should be. As to what constitutes an effective presentation, many professionals and students seem to exhibit an "I'll know it when I see it" attitude. In order to test this attitude, and to attempt to present elements of oral presentations in a somewhat more memorable and enjoyable manner than presenting a list of rules, a spectacularly bad presentation was developed, and was presented to students in both freshman and senior engineering design courses. After the presentation, the students discussed the presentation, and with some guidance from the professor, identified all forty-plus errors. The senior students then produced their own rules for effective presentations, which were used in constructing the rubric by which their own presentations were to be graded. The rules produced by the students were more detailed, but otherwise consistent with rules presented to students in similar courses in the past, and seem to have aided students in improving their presentation skills.

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THE PRESENTATION

The presentation was based on a presentation developed by the author as a brief introduction to Computer Science and Engineering fields for middle school and high school students. The content of the presentation was changed only slightly from the original, but approximately twenty errors were incorporated into the slides, and a roughly equal number were included in the physical presentation itself. This section of the paper will discuss these specific errors.

Errors in the Viewgraphs

The first slide of the presentation, shown in Figure 1, contains several errors:

- Picture overlaps text and images in the slide master format

- White text on the yellow image is hard to read

- Author information includes much irrelevant information

- Some text fonts have obviously failed to translate successfully, leaving gibberish on the final slide.
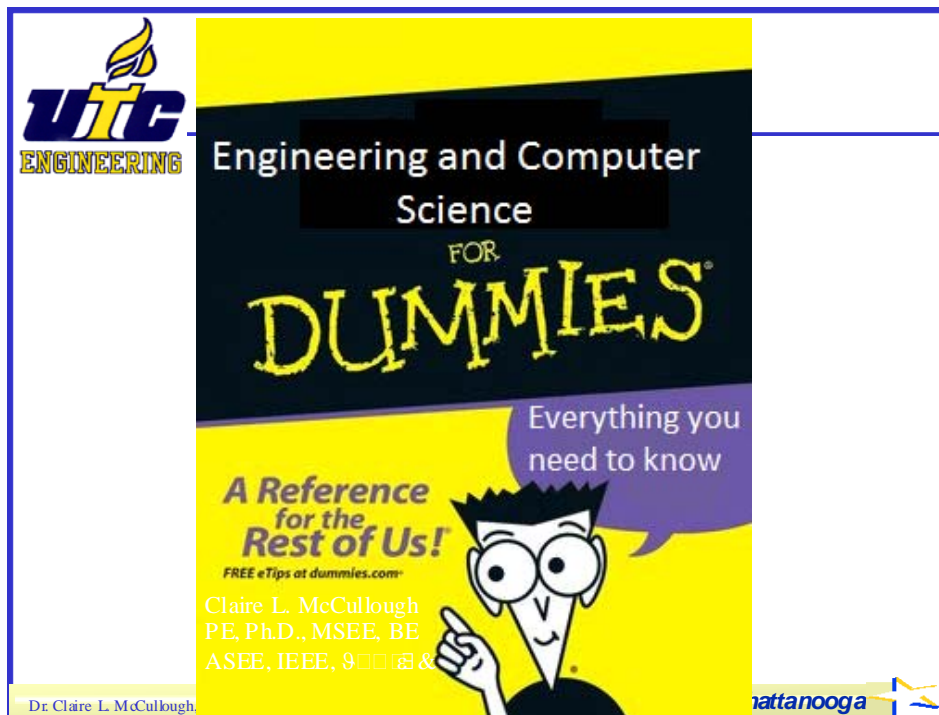

 Figure 1. Opening slide of the presentation

However, the largest error in this slide is the "cutesy" title slide—the cover art from a book in the "Dummies" series [5] was used to create the image indicating an "Engineering and Computer Science for Dummies" title. The image is inexpertly altered, with the background color obviously non-uniform, and the angle of the white title text not consistent with the rest of the title. The attempt to use a "cute" or "catchy" title or title slide is an error commonly made by inexperienced presenters, and can greatly detract from the professionalism of a presentation. The use of the "Dummies" title could also be taken as an insult by some members in the audience, and so would be a poor choice in any case.

Figure 2 shows a slide in which pictures have been stretched to a much larger size than the actual image could support, showing obvious pixilation in at least two of the images. Some of the images are also out of focus, and spill over the edge of the slide.

 Figure 2. Slide illustrating errors with pictures

Several of the slides used poor color and/or font choices, as illustrated in Figure 3. In addition to the blue on red text shown in this slide, which produces a "vibration" effect making the text very hard to read, other slides used such choices as a purple and red combination, which is considered pleasing in some areas of the world, but generally not in the west. Color shades for background and text too similar to allow for clear visibility were also used. Comparing fonts on the slides in Figures 2 and 3 also shows that the slides were not uniform in terms of font and style. The font used in the title of the slide in Figure 2 is a hard-to-read narrow script, and the font in Figure 3 is too bold and square to fit with the other elements of the slide format.

Figure 4 shows a slide with a large block of unbroken text, which is very difficult to read when the slide is actually projected. Figure 5, with the legend "Backup Slides," was actually the slide shown at the end of several professional presentations at a research meeting recently attended by the author. While many presenters do have a section of backup slides, this slide should obviously be used as a marker only, and should never be shown to the audience.

In addition to the errors illustrated in the slides shown, a variety of other errors was included. One was the inclusion of both a grammatical error and a spelling error in a single word, in the sentence, "There are so many choices that each of you can make there own decision about where to work!" In addition to the incorrect spelling of the word "their," this slide was meant to illustrate the confusion many students seem to feel in dealing with a singular pronoun, while not wishing to alienate some members of the audience by using the male "he" to represent both male and female, although this is still proper English usage.

Figure 3. Slide illustrating poor color choices

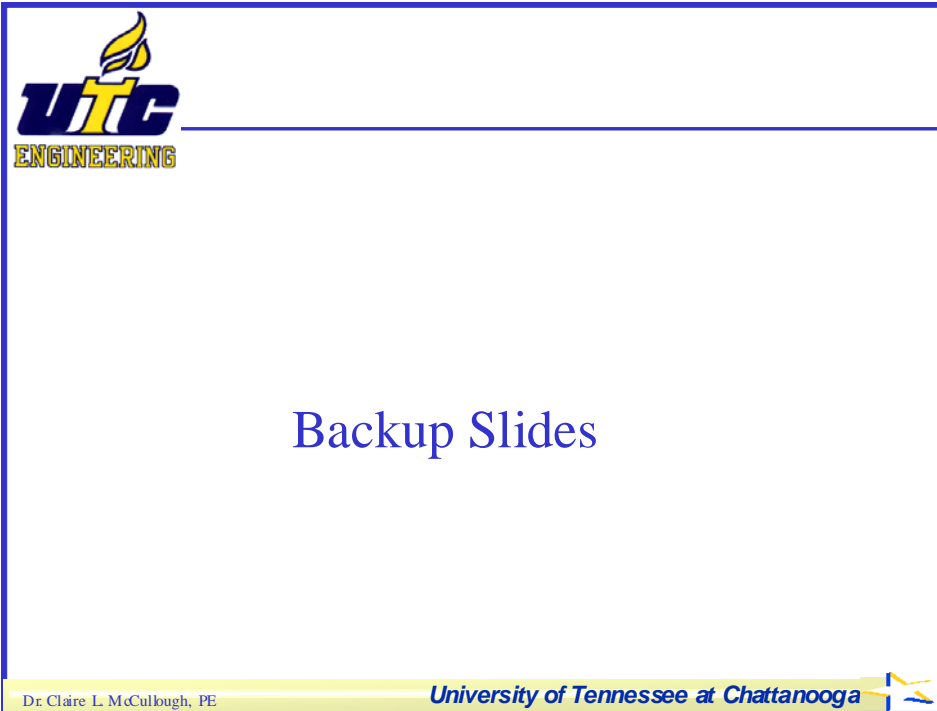**Figure 4.** Slide with hard-to-read block of text

Figure 5. Concluding slide

Other errors incorporated into the slides included:

- Use of all capitals ("shouting" in texting and email usage)

- Use of slide font larger than the font in the title of the slide

- Use of unequal columns

- Failure to use parallel construction in lists

- Use of strange and inconsistent slide and image transitions

- Use of fonts too small to read

- Too much white space left on the slides

- Different colored fonts on the same slide

- Failure to properly reference material in slides

In total, over twenty errors were included in a twenty-one slide presentation. Next, the actual presentation errors are discussed.

Errors in the Actual Presentation

The first error actually occurred before the presentation began: failure to load the presentation onto the equipment before the time scheduled for the presentation to begin, thus making the audience wait for the presentation to start. The presenter was inappropriately dressed, in jeans and a tie-dyed shirt, sandals, and a very casual hairstyle. She also wore an ankle bracelet which jingled with every step she took.

The author began the presentation using a laser pointer with a six-pointed star rather than a simple point. She kept the pointer moving continuously, playing over the slides, the ceiling, and the audience. She later pretended that the

batteries had run out, and switched to a manual pointer. With this pointer, she struck the screen several times, and twirled it when not using it to point. She had also arranged for her cell phone to ring during the presentation.

Since the goal was to illustrate a variety of incorrect behaviors, not all continued through the entire presentation, but some included were:

- Dry delivery

- Lack of enthusiasm for the subject matter

- Facing the slides rather than the audience

- Reading from the slides word-for-word

- Mispronouncing words

- Vocabulary inappropriate to the audience

- Addition of filler words such as "uh" and "um"

- Digressing from the subject into lengthy tangents

- Keeping slides up for too short a time to allow the audience to read them

The presentation included one "set piece" of theater. In a recent professional research meeting, the author had observed two serious errors by experienced presenters: one was a conversation between two audience members that the presenter did not control and which prevented the presentation from continuing; the other was the presenter actually getting into an argument with a member of the audience. This was worked into the example presentation as follows: a male student was selected in advance and provided with a rudimentary script. Several minutes into the presentation, the student raised his hand and addressed not the author, but the second professor in the classroom, with the observation, "Why do we have to do this this way? Wouldn't it be a lot more efficient to just tell us what you want?" The second professor made a noncommittal response, to which the student replied, "Well, *I* think this is a waste of time." The author stopped the presentation and responded with apparent anger, "This is a really important skill to your career, and I've been doing it since before you were born." The author then approached the student's desk, placed both hands on the desk, leaned into the student's face, and added, "I'm really good at this, and if you aren't smart enough to see that, you can just leave!" The presentation then resumed.

The presenter also considerably exceeded the time slot for the presentation—telling the students the presentation would last 5 minutes, then going on for approximately twenty minutes.

THE DISCUSSION

Since a few students appeared somewhat alarmed by the theatrical exchange, the discussion was begun with the introduction of, and thanks to, the student who assisted in the set piece. Students relaxed visibly when they realized that this had been scripted. When the students were asked whether any of them were on the presenter's "side" in the exchange, the author found it interesting that all of the female students "felt sorry" for her and supported her, until she "got in the student's face." It would make an interesting study to investigate whether female students expect that they and female professors will be interrupted by male students.

Next, the class as a group stepped through the slides in order, identifying the errors in each. The only errors that the students had any difficulty identifying were the annoying picture transitions and the misspelling of the word "their," as discussed previously.

When the discussion turned to the errors in the presentation itself, the students had a bit more difficulty, and needed more guidance to identify items such as the inappropriate vocabulary and mispronunciations. The male students did not think that the jingling jewelry caution was relevant to them, until they were reminded that men often carry keys or coins in their pockets, and that some do tend to play with them when nervous. The author found it interesting that while both freshman classes identified the inappropriate dress, the seniors failed to do so.

THE RULES

As homework, the senior students were required to use the discussion of the spectacularly bad presentation to develop their own set of rules for good, effective presentations. The rules were detailed and specific, and were divided into instructions for slides and instructions for presentation. The rules the students produced were discussed in class, and the lists consolidated into a single list of rules which the class agreed to abide by.

Rules for slides are:

- Present information in a concise and appealing way

- Make sure all graphs, charts, and text are readable

- Make sure everything on the slides is relevant, and does not distract from the message

- Be consistent with slides, formats, and transitions

- Make sure no element on a chart covers another

- Properly reference all material

- Slides should have a professional appearance, including font, format, and color combination

- Make sure that slides are free from errors, including grammar and spelling

- Use parallel construction in lists

- If using columns, make sure the columns are of equal length, if possible

Rules for presentation are:

- Dress appropriately for the audience

- Use a vocabulary appropriate to the audience

- If you can't pronounce a word correctly, don't use it

- Don't use any references or terms that could be offensive to the audience

- Don't turn your back to the audience

- Make sure your cell phone is silenced

- Speak clearly, with conviction, in a moderate pace

- If you use a pointer, use one with a professional appearance and control it at all times

- Maintain control of the presentation

- Do not argue with the audience

- Don't do or say anything that detracts from your message

- Use appropriate gestures

- Stay on topic

- REHEARSE! [6]

While there are items such as time management which the author would include in instructions for oral presentations, but which the students did not identify and include in their list, the class interaction and participation of the students in developing the rules made the students more enthusiastic about good presentations, and more aware of possible errors that they might not have considered before.

CONCLUSION

The spectacularly bad presentation was used as an aid to help students to develop a set of rules for what constitutes an effective presentation. The rules developed by the students were specific and detailed, and were consistent with the type of rules the author has given to students in the past in similar courses. At the end of the semester, the students still recalled a significant number of the errors in the presentation. When questioned, students who expressed a preference were roughly evenly divided as to whether the "spectacularly bad" presentation method was more effective than giving students a list of rules, but most felt that the presentation was certainly more fun than a list of rules; a conclusion with which the author heartily agrees.

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