# An Activity in Service of Improving Students’ Final Presentations

Abstract: Students are expected to create and deliver high-impact presentations or trainings as final projects to Organizational Behavior or Human Resources classes, yet they do not have the requisite skills. This exercise uses experiential learning to have students practice creating and delivering an interactive PowerPoint presentation in small groups in a short time mid-course to prepare them for their final projects. Students prepare and deliver a group interactive presentation, reflect, and then receive a “Best Practices” tip sheet all within 2.5 hours.

Keywords: Presentations, PowerPoint, Final Projects

Introduction

In undergraduate and graduate Organizational Behavior and Human Relations courses, faculty often include a final project that is a presentation on a key concept and/or training session. I learned to dread these presentations as boring and ineffective and realized that students did not know how to deliver effective presentations. I didn’t teach them presenting skills, worrying that I didn’t have time to “fit this in” to the curriculum. As well, most students were not taught these skills in undergraduate, more and more students are entering their MBA directly from undergrad, and often if they had worked they had not learned these skills on the job either.

Presenting can be a learned skill. Some individuals may have inherent talents, but most can learn to be more effective presenters (Andersen, 2012 in Metcalf, n.d.). Furthermore, I include skills other than content transmission, whether via lecture, speech or more motivational speaking, in this concept of presenting. When faculty expect students to present, we usually expect that presenters will engage the audience in some way. Certainly, in OB/HR, we often expect a training component in a “presentation,” and usually expect audience engagement. Thus, a combination of skills is required from our students that they have not necessarily been taught, including engaging speaking, impactful PowerPoint slides, and outcome-focused discussions, activities, or some other form of interaction. We know these are all components of good pedagogy (Bain, 2004; Halstead, 2011; Ramsden, 2003; Weimer, 2015), and we are in fact asking our students to teach in final presentations. While these are skills that can be learned, our students have not been taught them and our expectations for final presentations that rely on good pedagogy can be unrealistic.

Furthermore, I don’t tend to a great model, and thus cannot expect students to “just absorb” best practices, for two reasons. First, I use PowerPoint slides in my teaching and anticipate students will do the same (though they don’t have to in my final presentations), but I do not model best practices regarding slides. I have found useful slides (for me) keep students from having to take copious notes (so they are freer to participate in discussions) and provide a thorough outline of the class for those who were absent. Thus, my slides are too wordy, too detailed, and describe to rather than hook the audience. Second, while I do work to incorporate best pedagogical practices in my teaching, my hope is to do so well enough that students don’t notice. Unless I were to point out my pedagogy choices over and over, students do have the meta-cognitive ability to notice these choices; they simply participate as students (as they should).

Thus, my goal for this activity was to find a way for students to learn and practice some effective presentation skills to enhance the quality of their final project presentations, while incorporating some course content, in a short time.

I use this activity in an MBA Organizational Behavior course, but it could easily be used in an MBA HR course or adapted for undergraduate management courses in which final projects include presentations.

Theoretical Foundation

Experiential learning is well-researched approach to pedagogy that moves from content transmission to action and reflection. Kolb’s stages of experiential learning move through a continuous cycle from experimentation, to specific experience, to reflective observation, to conceptual development (Kolb, 1984) The outcome is a student who better understands and retains information due to personal experience. Moon (2004) suggests this cycle is most effective when it includes reflective learning (ie, a “doing” phase”), analysis of the learning, and feedback.

The experiential importance of this exercise is not an academic concept or practice, but presentation skills. While it is hard to make room in a syllabus for additional material, current research and surveys indicate that employers are interest in hiring employees with transferable skills including communication, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills (NACE, 2016; Smith, 2016). Learning to properly prepare and deliver a presentation or training covers these skills and thus serves our students well. In particular, PowerPoint is ubiquitous in business presentations and trainings (Katt *et al*, 2008), and thus why not teach students the basic of effective slide decks such as the 10/20/30 rule (Kawasaki, 2005).

# Learning Objectives

## Students will be able to:

## Identify elements of an effective presentation

## Create effective presentations in a team with limited time

## Articulate value of inserting interactive components into presentations

## Evaluate how effectively slides and interactivity have impacted successful presentations

## Feel more confident in their ability to engage and generate enthusiasm among audience

# Exercise Overview

# Context and framing (10 mins)

## Designed for 2.5-hour class, MBA (can be adapted across two shorter periods or for undergraduates)

## I have them assigned to final presentation groups already and have them sit in these groups in class. This activity works as a team development exercise as well as for learning presentation skills.

## I do two 2.5-hour classes on leadership styles. This is first of two classes.

## They have read a textbook chapter on leadership which includes brief overviews of the styles they will be presenting in this exercise, though they need to do quick online research as well for sufficient content

## I keep the focus of the class on leadership styles, not presenting skills. (In fact, content delivered by students is often weak so I have second class day on leadership to go more in-depth into content.)

## I do a brief (10 minute) introduction to leadership (only to get into topic and set stage for activity.) I touch on trait theory, explain the concept of behavioral theories and list several, then state that there are many “current leadership models/styles” and list these.

# Specific instructions (5 mins)

## I create a relevant local context for the activity related to a new local startup everyone has heard of. I explain that the co-founders want to explain their leadership style to their employees so that everyone is on the same page. They have decided to give a 5 minute interactive presentation on their style (See appendix A; specifics omitted.)

## You can add suggestions for ways they might make presentation interactive (class discussion on question, small group discussions on question, video clip with discussion, have class participate in roleplays or skits, etc). Or you may just wait and see what they come up with, or give them ideas if asked.

1. Activity (+/- 90 mins)

## Students have 30 minutes (followed by 15 min break which they can use if needed to finish presentation) to create a 5-min presentation on a leadership style that includes 5 slides (max), and some kind of interactive activity/participant engagement. You can assign a style to each group, or I give groups 30 seconds to pick top choices then randomly go around and have groups pick their topic (if taken, they must quickly select one that is available). Keeping this step fast-paced builds excitement; allowing them some choice if possible gives sense of ownership.

## I tell them to send me their slides; I pull them all up online, and list presentation order on blackboard

## Student groups present. I usually have 6 groups at 5-minutes each. Some groups go 6-7 minutes, plus brief transition time is needed.

## While groups are presenting and class is engaged, I take notes. I frame notes as things groups “SHOULD DO” or “ADVICE”. It helps to have a chart or 4 different headings for your notes: Slides; Content; Activity/Discussion/Exercise; Style

# Debrief (20-30 mins)

## After presentations, I need 5-10 mins to organize myself. During this time ask students to chat about what worked well and what should have been done differently, in their own presentations and others’.

## I then report back to them on my top suggestions for each heading, noting I will give them typed notes asap. I try to give examples of moments that were well done, and we laugh a lot. I have them review the typed notes in their group next class and we discuss what they agree with, would add, comments/thoughts. (See appendix B for sample of my notes)

# Thoughts on outcomes

## Content tends to be weak. They do not understand the nuances between leadership styles. Sometimes groups have not explained these well; often presentations are rushed in an attempt to include interactivity. As a result, I use a second class period to cover any content about leadership that I wish them to understand well.

## My experience has been that final presentations were much improved regarding slide quality, audience engagement and participation, and style. I no longer dread the boredom of sitting through presentations. However, quality of content still varies depending on the group’s effort and understanding.

# Variation

## Have students as well as faculty member assess presentations. Before presentations, hand out a chart with the four headings for them to make notes. Between each presentation, allow a few minutes for them to take notes. Then, when presentations are completed and while you are organizing your own notes, have them compare notes in their groups and generate 2-3 top pieces of advice for each heading. This may lead to a richer discussion of presentation best practices; however, the debrief then requires more time than simply offering your feedback and it may lead to some differences of opinion.

Session Description

This session would work as a 30- or 60- minute session. As a 60-minute session, I would do the exercise with participants. I would explain the purpose and introduction I give students, then have participants work in small groups for 15 minutes to put together a 5-minute interactive presentation with slides on an assigned leadership style. We would then have one or two groups present while the rest of the class participated and wrote down advice on the four headings (Slides; Content; Activity/Discussion/Exercise; Style). We would discuss their comments as well as discussing how this debrief usually goes in class, and finish with questions. I would give participants the relevant handouts and templates.

As a 30-minute session, I would describe the exercise, show a 5-minute video of one of my student presentations and have the group take notes on feedback, then discuss the video and feedback. I would conclude with having them brainstorm different topics to which they could apply this exercise.

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Appendix A

Leadership Style Interactive Presentation - Instructions

You launched a start-up last year [*related to distributing your co-founder’s new milk quality-testing wifi-enabled devices*]. You already have 12 employees and can’t wait to grow further. In fact, you have just won 1M in funding from [*X*] Competition and are excited to take your company to the next step.

However, you realize that some of your employees don’t necessarily understand your leadership style. Since you want everyone on the same page in order to take things to the next level, you’ve decided to give a short presentation on the leadership style you use.

Create 5 (max) slides (GREAT slides—you don’t want anyone thinking your company doesn’t know the latest in high impact presentations) and prepare a 5 minute presentation for your employees. You want to inspire them! In fact, you know the best presentations don’t just tell people what they should know, but get them involved in thinking or experiencing the idea. Even brief presentations can have a powerful impact.

Go!

Leadership Styles:

1. Transformational Leadership
2. Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX)
3. Servant Leadership
4. Authentic Leadership
5. Level 5 Leadership
6. Affiliative Leadership
7. Coaching Leadership

**Presentation/Training Tips**

**based on your Leadership Style Mini-Presentations**

1. **Slides**
2. Use your slide space well—don’t make words or graphs too small
3. Have a nice or relevant background. High contrast is good.
4. Provide clear, helpful, appropriate slide headings
5. Check your formatting—may be different mac to pc
6. Look at what you put on each slide. Simplify. If it is a paragraph, can you make it sentences? If it is sentences, can you make it bullet points? Can you omit a bullet point altogether?
7. **Presentation Content:**
8. Always know what your key point is that you want the audience to take away. Make sure you tie all parts of your presentation back to that key point. You may choose to restate this key point in various ways throughout the presentation. While presenting, saying things like, “So the gist of what we are saying is x” or “in other words, x” means you are restating your key point(s) in new or summary ways, which is always helpful.
9. You may want to tell us how your key point is unique/different from a similar concept or idea. This sets it apart and highlights it.
10. Use course vocabulary. It shows that you can draw links between concepts we discuss in class and the real world of OB.
11. Using quotes—from readings or from well-known figures on the topic—gives great insight, usually concise, adds new perspective on topic, gives us something to remember, shows importance of topic. Usually you want to give a quote its own page.
12. Do not use or read the “definition from the textbook.” Find a legitimate source for a definition and cite it.
13. Make sure you understand your topic, and every point you are conveying. If you feel confused then a) the audience will see that and b) the audience will also be confused.
14. **Activities/Exercises/Discussions**
15. **Video Clips:**

Video clips are usually great. Some tips:

1. Make sure to “set up” your clip: (what do we need to know about scenario before clip starts, what will see in clip? –eg, “This is a clip from The Office. The office has a new boss, Michael, who has just arrived and has decided to assign employees new responsibilities. In this clip, you see him trying to convince one of the employees to take on new responsibilities.”)
2. Give the audience a task to do while watching clip. (“While watching, see if you can list the influence tactics the boss Michael tries to use.” Or, “while watching, pick out three words related to leadership that he uses.”)
3. If you provide set up and task, you are setting the audience up for participation and success in your post clip-discussion/activity
4. **Activity/Discussion/Video Tips:**
5. Make sure you clearly close your activity or clearly transition to next part. Some examples of good closure/transition:
   * -summarize the takeaway/key point
   * -ask audience for three main takeaways
   * -ask audience to share main point with neighbor
   * -relate the activity to your slides or video or previous discussion.
   * -restate purpose of activity and say you hoped they learned something from it
6. Plan some prompts to get audience participating/volunteering if needed. Some examples:
   * -Just a heads up that I will be calling on people
   * -Take a risk! Someone volunteer!
   * -Who can I count on to not leave me floundering up here?
   * -After you chat in your group, designate someone as spokesperson to report back. We’ll go around the room.
   * -Let’s go around the room, I’ll start up here.
7. Think about how you will handle incorrect answers in a discussion or outcomes of an activity. Be prepared. You do not want your audience to take away incorrect information/skills. You may even want to anticipate incorrect answers/takeaways that may arise and how you will respond.
8. If doing activity or game, clearly explain rules. Often writing them on slide is helpful.
9. Tell us what we will be doing, give us instructions, before giving us a scenario or task.
10. **Style:**
11. Humor is great—can you plan a joke or a humorous story you can insert appropriately? But always err on side of caution.
12. Think about your tone. Monotone is terribly difficult on the audience, no matter your brilliance.
13. If you use the name of a real person, make sure you know how to say it correctly. Do not say it wrong—especially if others in audience know how to say it properly.
14. Figure out a formal, gracious, clear way to end your presentation.
15. Do NOT talk to the big screen.
16. Sometimes music adds a great touch.
17. Come out from behind the podium. Share space with the audience. Interact with audience.