

Video Assessment of the Previous Project Talk

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6.UAT

March 3, 2013

A friend of mine once opined that speeches were the best way to win or lose the hearts of a gathering of people. Indeed, this sentiment has been reinforced by the review of my own talks. While watching the video of my first speech, I noticed that my audience slowly lost interest in my words and then in me. I could not have imagined such a terrifying prospect until I had to sit through my own presentation.

Reviewing my presentation indicated a clear need for improvement. I lacked polish in several key aspects of public speaking. However, the review helped me develop a clear plan for progress.

Initial Reactions to the Previous Project Talk

The first time I watched my Previous Project Talk, I was struck by how poor my presentation actually was. I felt sick in my chair and wanted to stop the video. In particular, I was shocked by how many things I did unconsciously. I performed poorly on many of the concepts taught in lecture and recitation. In fact, I always believed I had moderately good public speaking presence, but reviewing the video showed me otherwise. I was dismayed by how different my actual presentation was from my conception of the presentation.

There were quite a few areas that I found that I needed to improve upon. Before reviewing my video, I thought that I excelled in some of these areas, such as gestures. However, throughout the video, I was struck by how poorly my gestures matched up with the content of my talk. The gestures I used had little to do with the words coming out of my mouth and they acted more as a distraction than a device for illustration.

Areas of Improvement for Previous Project Talk

Each review gave me more areas to improve upon. As mentioned already, my gestures seemed

overdone and unrelated to the content of my talk. My arm movement, especially, did not seem deliberate or premeditated. I frequently made large circles using my arms, and this periodic movement acted as a speaking crutch, just like a filler word. These large circles were not only distracting, but they also made me look less professional and engaging. Paradoxically, it had the opposite effect of what gestures are supposed to do--it seemed like I engaged less with the audience. Before my review, I had no idea that my gestures were so animated and unproductive.

I also discovered that I paused quite often in the middle of my sentences. These unintentional pauses served as another speaking crutch, allowing me to formulate words to finish my thoughts. However, these pauses could easily have come at the end of the previous sentence, making my talk more dramatic and fluid. One reason that these pauses occurred could have been my lack of preparation. For the Previous Project Talk, I only ran through the talk three times and was not completely confident about what I would say.

Another striking observation I made while reviewing my video was that it was extremely difficult to follow my talk. The number of technical terms and lack of organization made it difficult to follow my thought process. I would have been surprised if anyone in the audience could have given a summary of my talk afterwards because of its complexity.

A number of factors contributed to the talk's disorganization. First, I did not use sign-posting effectively. This prevented my audience from understanding the overview and direction of my talk. The sign-posting that I did use was not concise or descriptive enough to provide direction. Second, I used too many technical terms without defining them. Although the audience was a group of MIT students, terms like "callback" and "garbage collector" require a specific background in programming. If I had defined all of my terms as I used them, I believe that I would have been much clearer. Finally, I added too much unnecessary detail. Often, I would begin speaking about a topic and add filler information which provided the audience with nothing other than extra confusion. In the beginning of the talk, I spent an entire minute talking about the Ruby on Rails framework. I could have summarized this with one or two concise sentences.

Improving the Talk

A number of ideas that I integrated into the talk did not work as I had planned. For my introduction, I tried to engage the audience by having them identify with the web. However, my execution was not ideal (I asked them who had ever made a website or used Ruby on Rails). The introduction did not grab the audience's attention and did not directly relate to the talk. I essentially fell flat and almost caused an inflection at the very beginning of the presentation. The introduction, although well-intentioned, added no value and should have been replaced with a more poignant beginning.

The middle of the talk seemed like it rambled. While creating the presentation, I knew it would be difficult to explain the specific contribution I made to an audience, so I tried to move slowly from a

general discussion of Ruby on Rails down to the specific action I worked on. However, in my execution, I discussed Ruby on Rails as a framework but jumped to the specifics too quickly. I did not provide the audience any link between the high-level web framework and the low-level memory leak conditions. Spacing out my talk to cover more of the structure of the Rails framework (instead of the use cases) would help the audience get better technical background.

Comparison to Storyboarding Talk

A number of the issues I identified during the Previous Project Talk were improved upon during the Storyboarding Talk. In particular, the number of filler words decreased markedly (though remained high) and my speech became much more fluid. Many of the pauses I saw during the first presentation were removed with extra practice for the Storyboarding Talk. I felt more comfortable giving the second talk because I had rehearsed it so many times, and therefore, I was able to focus more on connecting with the audience instead of finding words to express myself.

The extra practice also helped me become more confident in my presentation skills. I knew exactly where my story was going because I had rehearsed it so many times. This meant I could recover more easily when I was derailed by unforeseen circumstances (for example, when I made a grammatical mistake when talking about why so many people used Ruby on Rails).

The organization of my talk also improved during the Storyboarding Talk. I believe a large part of the improvement stemmed from my practice in front of many different people. Each person I practiced in front of was able to provide constructive feedback on both presentation style and content. In comparison, during my Previous Project Talk, I only rehearsed in front of one person so my feedback was much more limited.

Despite these improvements, I still used gestures too excessively during the Storyboarding Talk. At times, the gestures seemed to get in the way of my explanation because they drew so much attention. Many of the gestures were intentional, such as putting objects into the room or clearing the room of objects, but I still made unintentional circular motions with my arms. Much progress was made between the first and second talks, but the number of filler words and the excessiveness of gestures during normal speech should be limited in the future.

Conclusions

The opportunity to review my presentation opened my eyes to my true aptitude at public speaking. I realized that the expectations that I had formed of my presentations were unfounded and that I need to address a number of issues when practicing for future presentations. Among these issues are excessive gesturing and use of filler words, as well as a lack of organization. My perception of my own Previous Project Talk differed significantly from my actual execution. This incorrect perception led to ignorance and apathy during practice. However, the review of

my videos has provided me with a better understanding of my weaknesses and shall hopefully help improve my public speaking skills.