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November 3rd

VE496 Advanced Technical Communication

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Keys to Impressive Presentation: Audience, Storytelling and Details

These three books have various emphasis but have the same goal – enabling people to successfully and effectively deliver their thoughts and reach their goals. *Engineering Speaking*, written by Rothwell and Cloud, focuses more on delivering technical information in engineering filed, especially the specific form of "formal" engineering presentations. Engineering, designing, building, optimizing and finally delivering, the book offers a systematical guide on the whole speaking process. The concrete and vivid examples under each key point gives a deeper understanding of how to apply theories into practice. *Resonate Present Visual Stories*, written by Duarte, has a key underlying theme of persuasion. It analogizes the interaction between the speaker and the audience with a simple physical phenomenon called resonance and argues that the speaker should understand the audience' hearts and minds deeply in order to impress them the best. *Story Telling with Data* is said to be "a data visualization guide for business professionals", but its insights into the way of truly "showing" your data has really wide application. The author, Cole Nussbaumer Knaflic, who has an educational and working background of both mathematics and business enables him to communicate effectively visually with data and his suggestions are of great help.

These three books are closely related. The underlying logic and several key points can verify each other. The presentation skills suggested by *Engineering Speaking* are not only applicable in the engineering field and engineering itself is also not only limited to academy. Thus, though the primary purpose of a technical presentation is to inform, it also has close relationship to persuasion, which is the focal point of *Resonate*. For example, in a technical

company, it is highly possible to introduce a certain high-tech product to investors and shareholders, expecting them to take desirable actions. Also, as data is not exclusive to the business world, the story-telling of data is a core course in almost all fields. After reading the three books, as a student majored in engineering and with an interest in business, I am much enlightened. I summarize three key points commonly emphasized, reflecting on my previous presentation experience and find them useful in future presenting.

To begin with, it is extremely important to know the audience. *Engineering Speaking* puts forward that "Good technical speech is accurate and appropriate for a particular target audience" (Rothwell et al 8). Form and content serve for function. To fully "resonate with" the audience, it is necessary to find out their background, purposes and likely level of understanding. For example, during my internship, the target companies need to make a presentation on their projects for funds allocation. Their target audience are the investment companies and many experts in this field. Experts are quite familiar with the related field and their purpose is to evaluate whether the researching and developing target is innovative and cutting-edge enough and whether they need that amount of funds and time they asked for. Thus, the target company should be rigorous enough to show the detailed high-tech elements in their products and convince the experts. Simultaneously, their target audience also includes investing companies, who do not know that much about the technical problems as the experts do but care more about the return of their investment. Then the target companies should also talk about their products' competitive advantages; what are their market strategies and how many profits can they bring to the investing companies. Then imagine that after the company successfully inventing the product, on their Product Launch to the public, just like Apples, their presentation should talk more about how their products can make people's life better. Though these three aspects --- technology, profits return and contributions to people's life, have close relationship with each other, the presentations to different audience should have different emphasis, thus achieving

different ideal functions. Just as *Engineering Speaking* indicates, “People are busy; they may not give your idea or proposal a chance if not provided with an adequate reason” (Rothwell et al 43).

Another thing in common is that these three books all introduce the idea of story-telling. In *Resonate*, Duarte puts forward that “You are not the hero; The audience is the hero” and also learns from myths and movie (25). It is indicated that most great presentations follow a mythological, literary and cinematic structure and through the beginning, middle and the end, there are two turning points --- “call to adventure” and “call to action” (Duarte 35). This is a process of leading the audience into kind of imbalance by contrast and then resolving it, in which case the simulating and comforting can create forward movement (Duarte 37). In the “call to action” part, the author divides the audience into four categories, each of which are expected to achieve different things. For example, the suppliers can be asked to “acquire, fund, provide resources or provide support” and the innovators can be asked to “create, discover, invent or pioneer” (Duarte 37). This also verifies the importance of probing into the target audience and the “story-telling” strategy can then further effectively push the persuasion forward. In business world, it is common to persuade. A presentation is sometime the best and the only platform that you can deliver thoughts to target audience. Thus, it is essential to make it impressive enough to finally reach a “comedy” effect, which does not mean “funny”, but a success of leading the audience to a new balance and taking the desired actions. In engineering world, it is common for engineers to make a presentation describing the process of their inventions. Just as what we have done in the course “Introduction to Engineering”, in the final presentation, we often begin with a real-life problem needing to be solved or a thought potentially able to make life better but has not been realized yet, and this puts audience into an imbalance and start to wonder: “Then how you solve it or how you make it comes true?”. With curiosity inspired, the audience tend to come into the speaker’s world. After the middle part,

the audience is facing a new turning point --- “call to action”. The speaker may want to impress professors to give a higher score, or persuade people from technology company into discovering their talent, or pushing other students into improving this product with them together.

The last but not the least thing is details. Some small changes can dramatically improve the presentation while little negligence will cause disasters. Data are extremely important in many fields. “Showing” the data is not an easy work. The choose of graphs, the arrangement of information and every addition of indicators should all be taken into serious considerations. *Storytelling with data* introduces many graphs not commonly used but are actually very useful such as slopegraph, waterfall graph and area. It also provides concrete examples of modifications to make graphs better. The comparison is so apparent that I realize the strength of details: A highlight of the only decrease among the increases immediately attracts readers’ attention and naturally provokes thinking; showing average within a range in a line graph conveys a lot more information then the line itself; in contrast, pie charts and 3D graphs should be avoided because of their inefficiency and inaccuracy. But actually, pie charts and 3D graphs are automatically generated by Excel and I find myself sometimes blindly follow Excel’s advice, and thus, this book helps me provoke new thoughts on the choosing of forms. Besides data, other details like avoiding clusters and unnecessary use of boundaries are also helpful in presentation preparation.

These three books offer brilliant ideas on giving an impressive presentation. Actually, these advices are not limited to the engineering field and the business world and even not limited to presentation. Under all circumstances where one wants to deliver their thoughts and provoking desirable actions, these key points can always be applied. For example, in my future career, when I talk to investors, express my proposals or present my research results, I believe that these suggestions can make me better.

Works Cited

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Duarte, Nancy. Resonate Present Visual Stories That Transform Audiences. Wiley, 2010.

Knaflic, Cole Nussbaumer. Storytelling with Data: The Effective Visual Communication of Information. John Wiley & Sons, 2015.