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# Disseminating research

François Heinderyckx

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Every single academic research undertaking is as unique as a fingerprint. The scientist or the team conducting the research is driven by a schizophrenic urge to innovate (bring something new, different, unheard of) while at the same time taking every precaution to remain within the boundaries of an accepted theoretical framework and of well-tried methodology. The challenge consists in being innovative, but within existing frames that can, at best, be carefully bent or stretched. The researcher, and the young researcher in particular, is torn between the concern for reproducing canonical approaches and thereby gaining credibility and the urge to step sideways and question or challenge the existing ways so as to prove his might and expertise.

But just why do we do research? What is driving us? Introspection would probably lead most of us to emphasize curiosity, thirst for answers or a passion for intellectual challenges. But beyond motivational factors at the level of career choices, research is formatted and researchers are driven and guided essentially by very concrete, structural and operational constraints. Academic research takes a variety of forms that usually fall within a limited number of scenarios (contractual research, grant, doctoral research) and approaches (empirical, conceptual, reflexive). Whatever the format, the research process will often be preceded, punctuated and most certainly completed with efforts to communicate, explain, present the project, its progress and results. In many cases, these communication moments become milestones and objectives of their own. In other words, we might state that, in essence, we do research to communicate about it and, as a result, research activities are carried out in such a way that they can yield substantial dissemination material, which becomes an end in itself (e.g. the 'deliverables' contractually required at the end of so many research projects).

Dissemination only takes a limited number of rather formalised and rigid formats: reports, books, book chapters, articles, doctoral dissertations, conference papers, oral presentations, workshops and any combination thereof. Dissemination is crucial: it is what remains of the entire research process. It is often the sole materialization of the investigation, the memory of the research, its lasting mark on the academic field. One must explain and convince before, while and after conducting research. Therefore, *communicating research* should be taken very seriously.

Dissemination is not the place for unrestrained creativity as it is usually framed by a number of rather strict and stern constraints applying to *volume* (number of words, pages, minutes, surface), *form* (text, visual material, colour or black and white, sound), *tone* and *register of language* (as determined by the audience's skills and expectations), *language* (not necessarily that of the author, leading to perilous language transfer and language correction), not to mention habits, traditions, customs, templates or pre-defined formats.

Whatever the constraints, the author has to recognize them, accept them as a given (with little room to negotiate, bend or circumvent them) and make a number of choices accordingly. Those choices have to be well thought out for they will largely determine how the work is received, understood and considered. Of all the means of dissemination, oral presentations are so common that they are often taken for granted and ill-prepared, if not completely botched up. This chapter will discuss the essential features to be taken into consideration while preparing an oral presentation.

## 2. ORAL PRESENTATIONS

An oral presentation is usually combined with other, more elaborated dissemination material such as a report or a full article or a publication that it will just present, summarize, emphasize and show to advantage. Yet it should not be considered as mere packaging or a supporting act but, rather, as a stand-alone communication exercise which carries its own set of meanings for those who will not be exposed to the full material and possibly encourage others to follow up and seek the core dissemination kit.

Like any communication undertaking, an oral presentation must be prepared on the basis of clear *objectives* taking into account the information and the messages to be conveyed, the characteristics of the

audience, and the impression to be produced with that audience. In addition to these objectives, the preparation must, from the outset, take in all of the constraints that weigh on the presentation. These include the attention span of the audience, the familiarity of the audience with the subject, the equipment available at the venue, and most importantly, the *duration* or time allotted for the presentation. Regarding this time factor, one must recognize that the scheduled duration is set and known in advance, that it is not a punishment or a disowning, that it does not stretch and that it is non-negotiable (at least not on the spot). Because the duration is agreed upon in advance and because the presentation is prepared beforehand, any significant problem with time management during an oral presentation is likely to be perceived as sloppy if not simply unprofessional and will invariably make everybody very uncomfortable.

Why are so many oral presentations spoiled by poor time management? Many presenters overlook a number of pitfalls. It is first of all essential to calibrate the content adequately. One can only say so much in a given time and any attempt to say more (let alone to say everything), i.e. to say too much, will automatically result in confusion, superficiality and frustration on the side of the audience. A presenter does not look smarter or more skilled by talking faster or using denser language. At best he or she will look agitated and confused. When one prepares a presentation, one should decide on a limited number of aspects, ideas, and perspectives to be the object of the presentation, in such a way that it is convincing, intelligible and engaging.

Secondly, because time is strictly limited, it is essential to show a strong sense of *'economy of words'*. Although all presenters are frustrated by how little time they have, it is puzzling to see so many of them wasting so much of that precious time. To save time, you should limit apologies, compliments, acknowledgements and moving thanks to a strict minimum (no one is really interested). You should also avoid altogether any moaning or complaining about how difficult it is to say so much in so little time, or that talking in the last session before lunch break is so difficult. Also pointless and yet so common: the apologies for the poor language skills because (as is so often the case) you present in a language which is not your own. Either your language is indeed not very good and the audience will have guessed and, most importantly, you then have nothing to apologize for (after all, you are making an enormous effort and should be congratulated rather than forgiven); or your language is quite good in spite of that, and then your apologies will sound like false modesty. You should also avoid insisting on what you

will not cover in your presentation, but wish you could if only you had the time (you are only wasting it and creating further frustration in the audience).

Regarding the form of your presentation, it must be adapted to the circumstances and should always be guided by how it can best serve your message. In academic circles, one should in most cases opt for sobriety, simplicity, clarity and readability. This does not mean that a presentation should be dull and boring. In fact, a presentation is an opportunity to show style and personality, and you should feel encouraged to do just that, as long as it does not impede the message, as long as it does not create a distraction or interference.

Key to preparing a presentation is, of course, determining what to say, what words to use. Because of the time constraints, you must always very carefully prepare and rehearse the presentation. It is tempting, particularly for inexperienced speakers, to prepare a text to be read aloud. Experience shows that this does not produce the most engaging presentations. And yet it can be quite advisable, particularly if the presentation is in a foreign language and/or if the context or the circumstances are very formal and intimidating. But this requires one condition that is generally overlooked (thus producing dull presentations): Quite simply, the text must be written in *oral style*. One does not speak like one writes. Even the most formal, top-level academic discussions are not worded like academic writing. So reading out aloud all or parts of an article or book chapter is not appropriate for an oral presentation unless it undergoes some serious rewriting. The sentences are to be shorter, the level of language slightly lower, the style much more narrative. A captivating oral presentation is often one that tells a story, that takes the audience on a dazzling yet comfortable journey into a topic, an issue, a concept, a line of thinking.

If you choose not to read from a printed text, you must always have a structure, a summary, an outline, a mind map or any kind of organised set of words that will guide you through the sequence of core ideas that you have decided to present. This outline can be more or less elaborate, from keywords to short sentences. It can be printed on cards or on normal paper or take the form of the slides that you decide to project during your presentation (recent versions of slide show software let you display a presenter screen where only you can see notes in addition to the slides projected). If you want to avoid reading a text but fear to be too hesitant or at a loss without one, you can prepare a full text (oral style) and highlight the key words so that you can use the highlighted words as an outline, but can fold back to plain reading if necessary.

Whatever the medium you choose to guide you through the presentation, you will necessarily need to rehearse, and often to rehearse over and over again, if possible with a test audience (one person is enough). This is essential for a number of reasons: Fine-tuning it to make sure the duration fits the requirements, giving your talk adequate fluency, practicing the pronunciation of difficult words, changing the words that make you stumble, finding the right speed, tone and voice control, trying how to establish eye contact and dealing with your body language, gaining confidence to appear more relaxed and make you and your audience more comfortable. Rehearsing a 15-minute presentation only takes ... 15 minutes, so there is really no excuse for not doing it. A speaker going overtime is usually one that did not rehearse, or one that did not stick to the plan and did not resist the urge to improvise or digress. Improvisation and digression should be avoided in rigid or formal contexts.

### 3. SLIDE SHOWS

Projecting slides with a data projector has gradually become the norm for just about any kind of oral presentation from briefings to courses to conferences. As we have all experienced over and over again, some of these slide shows make quite an impression, but often not the impression intended by the author (or so do we hope). Academic small talk is full of anecdotes concerning presentations where the slides were so dreadful that it is the only mark the presentation left among the audience.

Somehow, while preparing a presentation, the simplest and yet most crucial question seems to be increasingly overlooked: *Do you really need slides?* And if you do, what should you show? Answering these questions requires to fully appreciate the role of visual material in an oral presentation. Essentially, slides are a means of enhancing the oral presentation by providing visual aid in the form of the structure of the talk, figures (tables, diagrams or graphs), quotes and other visual material. Most importantly, one should remember what slide shows are *not*. Slides should never be a rival to the talk, nor should it be a mere transcription of the talk (the karaoke syndrome). Slides should not be a microfilm contest. They cannot be an addition or an appendix to the talk where the speaker tries to add some of the things that could not be squeezed into the talk for lack of time. The slides should not be a distraction from the talk and take the attention away from what the speaker says. In short, the slides and the talk should harmoniously

combine in one fitted presentation, not remain two parallel, competing streams of messages.

Slides can be used very punctually where needed: for a table, for a photo, for the outline of the talk, or even simply to display the title of the presentation and the contact details of the presenter. In the case of a fully-fledged slide show, a number of hints are to be considered. It is advisable to limit the number of slides. Having too many slides usually signals a slide show that competes with the talk or that replicates it literally. On average, it is good practice to display 3 to 4 slides per 10 minutes of presentation. Slides should be simple and designed to emphasize meaning. Avoid cryptic page layout. Avoid heaviness, overload: Do not try to display too much on one slide and do not hesitate to split it in two or more slides. Each slide should display one idea or one group of ideas. A rough rule of thumb is that each slide should display 5 to 6 lines of text, never more than 10 lines. Remember that not everything you say or even everything you talk about must be displayed. Full sentences should be avoided (prefer short groups of words or expressions), except for quotes (it is comfortable for the audience to read along when the presenter reads a quote). If a figure is too complex to be displayed on a slide, then do not use it (instead of apologizing for the fact that it cannot be displayed properly!). Instead, you can consider printing handouts of that particular figure if it can be better displayed on paper (and if it does not disturb the presentation).

The form of the slides themselves requires great care. Clear and sharp slides will soothe the audience and make them more receptive to the presentation. All computer programmes used to prepare slide shows offer templates. It must be emphasized that a number of these templates are not necessarily suitable for your needs. You should probably consider preparing your own template from scratch or by modifying an existing template. Your slides should reflect your personality and the nature of your work, but should also remain within the limits of clarity and readability. Each slide, by today's technical standard, consists in a rectangle of 1024 x 768 dots ('pixels'). Although these dots can take an impressive range of colours, the possibilities are greatly restricted by the fact that the slides are projected on a screen and this distorts and impoverishes dramatically the image displayed as compared to what it is on the screen of your computer. To take the full measure of the limitations, consider the white screen on which the slides will be shown *before* the projector is turned on: Although you would call that screen 'white', mind that this shade will be that of the black portions of your slides. Indeed, projectors do not project 'blackness' and since conference



rooms are rarely dark rooms, all images displayed are dramatically lighter than intended. Not to mention colour distortions produced by the lighting of the room. You should therefore make sure that there is sufficient contrast between your text and the background and that your slides can survive severe colour distortion. Yet you should avoid the maximum contrast provided by black text on a white backdrop, which proves to be uncomfortable by being somewhat blinding and tiring to the eye. Some colour combinations are notoriously inappropriate for on-screen display as, for example, blue on red (or red on blue). It is also common practice to use an image or a logo as the slide background. This is often unfortunate because that background image will produce a 'noisy' clutter on the slide and disturb the perception of the text or figure in front. If you do want to use a background image to create an atmosphere or emphasize visual cues, you should make sure your text is displayed in plain or semi-transparent boxes.

The font size is also to be chosen carefully. Unless you are familiar with the venue or your presentation, you should anticipate that the image projected might be smaller than you would have expected. To be on the safe side, the text on the slides should not be smaller than 20 points. On the other hand, text should not be too big (40 points maximum) for it will feel as if your slides are shouting (unless this is what you want to convey). You should use standard fonts to make sure they will be available on the computer used for the presentation (else the font substitution will make a mess of your slides) and prefer 'sans-serif' fonts (e.g. Arial, not Times), as their shapes are simpler and thus have a better rendering on screens.

Avoid fancy special effects for slide transition or to make elements appear or disappear, unless these effects have a meaning and enhance your content. Visual effects will not impress your audience; it will be a source of distraction, of mockery, if not of contempt. In general, remember that there is room for complex visuals, for personified and creative ways to design your slides, but only as long as it serves your purpose and enhances your message and as long as it does not impede your presentation. Just like any narration, an oral presentation must come to an end and so does the supporting slide show. For some reason, a large number of presenters see fit to end their presentation with a 'thank you' slide, often aggravated by a silly picture or clip art. This is meant to signal the audience that the presentation is over and to end on a light note. It is, however, counterproductive. For one thing, coherence would require starting with a 'hello' slide. But more importantly, the last slide is like the last bite of the last dish in a good meal. It determines

largely the lasting impression about the whole meal. It is therefore highly advisable to display a last slide highlighting the key ideas that you wish your audience to remember and to discuss if there is a time for debate.

Oral presentations are usually a stressful experience. Therefore, you should not miss opportunities to reduce stress: prepare, rehearse, but also anticipate the usual suspects such as computer failure, lost paper or USB flash drive. Simple precautions include: have your presentation and slides on a portable medium (USB or CD), in different formats including a PDF export of your slides (you can then do a slide show with any PDF reader in full screen mode), also a paper printout and most importantly, be prepared to make your presentation without any slides if it comes to that!