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**Teaching Presentation Skills to Undergraduates:
Students' Evaluations of a Workshop Course**

Andrew M. Colman, Department of Psychology, University of Leicester

Address for Correspondence:

Andrew M. Colman

Department of Psychology

University of Leicester

Leicester LE1 7RH

E-mail: amc@leicester.ac.uk

Abstract

A 10-hour workshop-based course designed to teach communication skills to undergraduates is described and evaluated. In five two-hour sessions, the course covered technical aspects of written communication, oral presentations to small and medium-sized groups, interview skills, non-verbal communication, and skills associated with assessing the presentations of others and providing constructive feedback. Evidence from a course evaluation questionnaire and from observations of the students' performance suggests that the course was reasonably successful in achieving its aims.

**Teaching Presentation Skills to Undergraduates:
Students' Evaluations of a Workshop Course**

Andrew M. Colman, Department of Psychology, University of Leicester

A grant from the Enterprise Learning Initiative (ELI) made possible the establishment of an innovative workshop course in presentation skills for first-year B.Sc. Psychology students at Leicester University in 1993. In the light of experience and feedback from the students, improvements were implemented for the following session. The aim of this article is to outline the course and to evaluate its success in the context of questionnaire responses collected after the second session.

A number of publications have drawn attention to the increasing importance that is being attached to the teaching of transferable skills within the undergraduate curriculum in Britain (e.g., Arnold, Newstead, Donaldson, Reid, & Dennis, 1987; Hughes & Large, 1993; Newstead, 1990). There is evidence that both academics and employers place great emphasis on social and communication skills in particular (Hay, 1994; Mitchell, 1984; Roy, 1987). A number of recent publications have discussed communication skills in general (e.g., Hargie, 1989; Hills & McLaren, 1987; Jamieson, 1985; Leggott & Cooper, 1990; Scammell, 1990; Wright, 1992) or presentation skills in particular (e.g., Graham, 1995; Jolles, 1993; Mandel, 1988), and some of these have presented exercises, courses, or workshop activities designed to improve communication and presentation skills (see also Brooks, Latham, & Rex, 1986; Careers Research and Advisory Centre, 1987; Habeshaw & Steeds, 1993; Mager, 1991).

Cuthbert (1992) outlined and discussed a social skills training course based on experiential exercises that was introduced into the BA by Independent Study at Crewe and Alsager College of Higher Education. The aim was not to teach social skills directly through practice and feedback but to provide a supportive and enabling context within which students were encouraged to become more aware of their own social experience and behaviour. The

experiential exercises used in the course were drawn largely from Forsyth (1990), Johnson and Johnson (1990), and Pfeiffer and Jones (1974), and Cuthbert cites persuasive evidence of the course's success. Mitchell & Bakewell (1995) presented evidence of marked improvements in oral presentation skills following a course based on peer evaluations, and evidence has also been published showing improvements in writing skills following courses and workshops designed to improve them (e.g., Madigan & Brosamer, 1990; Oley, 1992; Radmacher & Latosisawin, 1995; Torrance, Thomas, & Robinson, 1991, 1992, 1993; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). The course described in this article had the aim of improving both oral and written communication skills using methods drawn from the literature discussed above, including practice, feedback, and peer evaluation.

Course outline

The course was based on workshop activities, and its general aim was to improve students' skills in presenting information both orally and in writing. By the end of the course, they were expected to have learnt the following:

- to plan, prepare, and deliver oral presentations to small and medium-sized groups;
- to plan and write essays, laboratory reports, and projects in a structured and informative manner, following the standard conventions in psychological literature regarding layout and citation of references;
- to carry out peer assessment using agreed performance criteria and to provide constructive feedback.

When the workshop was originally run, the group met for 10 one-hour sessions. The tutors felt that the sessions were too short, and this was strongly confirmed in feedback from the students who participated. In the light of these considerations, and in view of the fact that by

the following session the class had grown too large to be handled in the same way, we divided the group into two halves and ran each half for five two-hour sessions. This meant that each student had a ten-hour course as before, but in five two-hour sessions rather than in ten one-hour sessions. Attendance at all sessions was a course requirement, and this was rigorously enforced. As a consequence, there were no dropouts, and there were typically only one or two absentees (supported by medical certificates) from any session.

Each session of the workshop required the help of five postgraduate students and research assistants acting as workshop tutors. The course could not have been run without a high ratio of tutors to students, because many of the activities required groups no larger than eight. In addition, especially during the planning stages, help was provided by consultants from the Institute of Training and Development (now called the Institute of Personnel and Development or IPD) and the Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). Both of these bodies have extensive experience of developing and running training courses for various types of skills.

The workshop involved active participation on the part of the students from the very first meeting. The structure of the course in its revised format is described in the following paragraphs.¹

Workshop 1: Writing for psychology

The objectives of this first workshop were general ice-breaking and the introduction of some basic principles of writing for psychology. We began by introducing the tutors and outlining the objectives of the course. The ice-breaking exercise, which worked remarkably well and can be recommended for more general use, was arranged as follows. The students and tutors were given self-adhesive labels to attach to their clothing and were asked to write on the labels their names (first names and/or nicknames and/or surnames in whatever forms they preferred) plus at least two keywords that had some special relevance to themselves, such as “Newcastle”, “flute”, or “tired” (these are keywords that were actually chosen). The purpose of the keywords was to act as triggers for the brief conversations with strangers that were to follow.

Each person present, including each of the tutors, then paired off at random with another person and talked to their partner with the aim of learning as much as possible about the other person in the time available. Every two minutes a bell was sounded and everyone chose a new partner, and this sequence of brief encounters continued for about 30 minutes.

One of the tutors then gave a short talk on classical and generative approaches to writing and various problems associated with written communication that have been discussed in the literature (Branthwaite, Trueman, & Hartley, 1980; Colman, 1991; Elbow, 1973; Evans & Bart, 1995; Harris & Wachs, 1986; Hartley, Branthwaite, & Cook, 1980; Madigan & Brosamer, 1990; Oley, 1992; Polyson & Tromater, 1985; Radmacher & Latosisawin, 1995; Snyder, 1993; Torrance, Thomas, & Robinson, 1991, 1992, 1993; Wason, 1970, 1985; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994).

We then explained why particular methods of citing references and presenting psychological information have become conventional within the discipline. Students were given a handout of a journal article heavily annotated to draw attention to various stylistic and editorial conventions. The article was of no special intrinsic interest but had been chosen

because it illustrated many of the points to be raised regarding citation of references, layout of abstracts, presentation of tables and figures, and other formal aspects of technical writing in psychology. Students were assigned to small groups and were given another handout containing examples of *bad* writing culled largely from student essays and laboratory reports. Using the annotated article as a guide, they were asked to explain what was wrong with each example of bad writing. During the small-group discussions, tutors clarified the finer points.

Workshop 2: Short presentations

The objectives of this workshop were to introduce students to the general principles of public speaking and to give them experience of delivering short presentations. We began the session by introducing some of the principles of oral presentations in general and small-group presentations in particular (Hargie, 1989; Hargie, Saunders, & Dickson, 1994; Hay, 1994; Hills & McLaren, 1987; Jolles, 1993; Mitchell, 1984; Mitchell & Bakewell, 1995). The students were shown a commercially produced training video called *Speaking With Confidence* (Ellvers-Dix, 1988), which illustrates some of the fundamental ideas although it is really geared to the world of business, and were invited to voice their reactions to it. They were also encouraged to discuss their own views and experiences of public speaking, stage fright, and so on.

The students were split into small groups in which they were shown the best ways of using overhead projectors, slide projectors, flip charts, and other audio-visual aids, all of which they were encouraged to try out for themselves. They were then given, without any prior warning, the following list of general topics on which to give brief (three-minute) presentations: “The Best Soap” (which was generally interpreted in its operative rather than its detergent sense), “Date Rape”, “Public Transport”, “Dinosaurs”, “My Addiction”, “Rap”, “Gay Rights”, “Recycling”, “Embarrassment”, and “Handling Money”. Each student selected one topic each from the list and spent 15 minutes preparing a talk. Acetates and

overhead projector (OHP) pens were supplied.

Tutors distributed and explained a handout containing a checklist for observing presentations and a sheet listing a number of “feedback tips and hints”. Each tutor then introduced the first speaker in the group, who gave a three-minute presentation while the tutor kept time. At the end of the presentation, the audience was encouraged to applaud, and the speaker introduced the person who was to follow, and this continued until every student in the group had spoken. At the end, the tutor led a *constructive* informal discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each presentation.

Workshop 3: Seven-minute presentations

The main objective of this workshop was to give students more practice at delivering prepared presentations in front of small groups. The presentations were slightly longer than last time, and members of the audience were encouraged to give more detailed and structured feedback. Written guidelines for giving feedback and a handout consisting of a set of rating scales for the evaluation of presentations were distributed and discussed until the students understood them properly. The rating scales related to the content of the presentations (clarity, informativeness, interest); aspects of vocal presentation (volume, clarity, pace, variety); body language (posture, gesture, facial expression, eye contact); and the use of visual aids (clarity, informativeness, interest). Each student was also given a copy of a useful booklet called *Productive Presentations* (Owen, 1991).

The students were divided into small groups and were given 25 minutes to prepare their seven-minute presentations based on any interesting lecture(s) they had attended – not necessarily in psychology. At the end each presentation members of the audience filled in their rating sheets out of sight of one another and discussed the presentation tactfully and constructively, with the discussion being carefully monitored by the tutors, to provide the presenters with feedback. Each student’s ratings of the others’ presentations remained

private and were never revealed to anyone else. They were intended only to refine and structure students' evaluations of one another's presentations and to develop their critical skills in this area.

Workshop 4: Interview skills and NVC

The objectives of this workshop were to provide students with experience of delivering and receiving brief social skills training specifically for improvement of non-verbal communication and interview skills. The tutors introduced it by outlining the basic findings of research into non-verbal communication (NVC), touching on paralanguage (vocal communication), facial expression and gaze, kinesics (posture and gesture), proxemics (spatial communication), and channel inconsistency (Argyle, 1988; Bull & Frederikson, 1995), and the fundamental principles of social skills training or SST (Argyle, 1995; Hargie, Saunders, & Dickson, 1994; Hollin & Trower, 1986).

A handout summarizing the most common social skills deficits was distributed, together with a set of rating scales designed specifically to evaluate the separate social skill components, and the use of these materials was discussed. Students were divided into small groups and then into pairs. In odd-sized groups the tutors paired up with students so that everyone had a partner. Students interviewed each other, using a written interview schedule resembling the questionnaires to which celebrities are often invited to respond in the press ("What is your idea of perfect happiness?" and so on). They then delivered SST using a set of basic techniques (feedback, practice including negative practice, modelling, and coaching) outlined in a separate handout that was fully explained, while the tutors acted as observers and facilitators of the SST. From time to time members of the pair swapped roles or partners at the tutor's discretion. This whole exercise lasted for about an hour.

Workshop 5: Pre-prepared presentations

The objectives of this final workshop were to give students more experience of preparing short presentations, delivering them to medium-sized groups, and providing feedback on the presentations of others. The tutors introduced it by reminding students of the fundamental principles of effective presentations, including optimal use of audio-visual aids and self-monitoring of verbal and non-verbal communication. The students had all been warned at the end of the previous workshop to prepare seven-minute presentations on academic topics of their own choosing and had been supplied with OHP materials.

For this workshop, the students were divided into medium-sized groups – approximately 12 in each group to fit the time constraints. The tutor in each group introduced the first speaker (“This is Siggy Freud who’s going to talk on Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious”), and after each presentation the speaker introduced the one that followed. The members of the audience were encouraged to make notes during the presentations so that feedback could be given in general terms at the end. After all the presentations, the tutor in each group led a session of discussion and feedback. After this, the whole group reassembled for a general wrap-up and to fill in (anonymously) a detailed course evaluation questionnaire, which contained seven five-point rating scales (see Table 1) plus a section for further comments.

Evaluation of the course

Analysis of the results showed that the workshop received generally favourable ratings from the students, although the ratings were not as high as we had hoped. The seven items of the course evaluation questionnaire, together with the means, standard deviations, and ranges of the students’ ratings, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

In response to Item 7 of the course evaluation questionnaire, the final global rating of the overall quality of teaching on the course, the students gave a mean rating of 3.42 on a scale from 1 to 5, which equates to 68 per cent, or a good 2:1, and the standard deviation was not large, suggesting that there was a fair degree of consensus on this rating. The students gave an even higher mean rating of 3.53 in response to Item 6, which asked how much they gained from the course in terms of understanding and skills, though the standard deviation was slightly larger in this case. The students found the content of the workshops somewhat (but not very) interesting (Item 4), the handouts helpful (Item 5), the workshops well structured and presented (Item 1), and important concepts and methods well explained (Item 3), though this last item yielded a larger standard deviation than any other. From the students' responses to Item 2 it would seem that there was about the right amount of material in the course and, in view of the very small standard deviation, that there was general agreement about this. These results, particularly the responses to Items 6 and 7, suggest that the course was well received and reasonably successful in achieving its aims.

The informal comments were also generally encouraging. One student wrote that the course "has made me feel more confident with public speaking" and that "it will be helpful with seminars"; another wrote that the course "does help boost up self-confidence and self-esteem", which was a by-product we hoped it would generate; and several students commented that they "now feel more confident at speaking in public", as one put it. The course certainly did not entirely eradicate students' anxiety about speaking in public. One student wrote, "I thought this course was very stressful but very helpful"; another wrote that "many students came to dread the talks". However, a different student commented that "by presenting in small groups [at first] it made us less nervous and more confident", and some others expressed the same thought in different words. Some students thought that "having little time to prepare for the first two talks was a good idea – reduced anxiety", which was of

course our intention, but others felt that “the 1st presentation we did, there should have been more notice for preparation”. Among the negative comments was the following: “I have done quite a few presentations before, so in general found this course unnecessary. While the content was in the main interesting, I found many poorly presented, normally trying to cram too much information into too little time”. Finally, it is worth recording the following suggestion from one student: “I think lecturers should take this course!!!”.

In evaluating the success of the course, perhaps the most important observation is that a *vast* improvement was apparent in the presentation skills of virtually all of the students. Although this effect is difficult to quantify, it was plainly apparent to both the tutors and the students themselves. The tutors’ informal notes of the students’ presentations showed a marked qualitative improvement even from the second to the third workshop. Furthermore, this improvement apparently transferred, to some extent at least, to their regular essays, laboratory reports, and seminars. According to the qualitative assessments of the workshop tutors and spontaneous comments of members of staff who were not involved in the workshops, the students gained confidence, lost some of their inhibitions about public speaking, learned some useful techniques, and became generally more skilled at technical writing and public speaking. It is hard to think of many other skills that will stand them in better stead both during their time at university and after they graduate, almost irrespective of what they end up doing.

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Footnote

¹Copies of the written materials developed specially for the course are available on request from the author.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Student Course Evaluations ($N = 38$)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
1. How well were the workshops structured and presented? (1 = very poorly, 5 = very well)	3.53	0.76	2–5
2. Was there too much or too little material in the course? (1 = too little, 5 = too much)	2.89	0.51	2–4
3. How well were important concepts and methods explained? (1 = very poorly, 5 = very well)	3.50	1.06	1–5
4. Did you find the content of the workshops interesting? (1 = very uninteresting, 5 = very interesting)	3.11	0.98	1–5
5. Were the handouts helpful? (1 = very poor, 5 = very good)	3.32	0.93	1–5
6. How much did you gain from the workshops (understanding, skills etc.)? (1 = very little, 5 = very much)	3.53	0.95	2–5
7. How would you rate the overall quality of teaching on this course? (1 = very poor, 5 = very good)	3.42	0.79	2–5