
Tips for winning laughter and applause while making your point

The Art of Crafting Memorable Presentations

by Clark Adams

When asked to recall my favorite workshop, I quickly remembered the instructor who passed out cameras to our group of about 20 in-service teachers. We worked in threes; instructions were minimal:

- 1. Try to capture images that have personal meaning from your childhood.*
- 2. Be thoughtful about the composition of your photographs.*

As the group erupted with questions about how to use the camera, where we should go, how many pictures we should take, how we would use the pictures, our instructor chased us out the door with instructions to be back in a couple of hours.

Upon our return, we learned how to develop the film. We were guided to begin analyzing the images and speculating about each other's intended messages and recollections. Then we had plenty of time to explain our own; even those of us whose pictures failed miserably had ample time to describe the nobility of our intentions.

Since this was a workshop on curriculum, not photography, we continued by generalizing our experience into a collective theory of curriculum development. The many ways in which this total experience grabbed us are transparent:

- We made decisions.
- We developed teamwork within our small groups.
- We had a challenging and personal design task.
- There were many varying ways and opportunities for different people to shine.
- We developed group wisdom.
- We had a memorable experience!

This particular workshop led me to a simple approach for my own work-

shop planning, stressing three benchmarks:

1. Entertainment.
2. Relevance.
3. Personal meaning.

These basic reference points provide far more planning support than the shop-worn approach that instructs presenters to (1) tell the audience what you expect to tell them, (2) tell them, and (3) tell them what you told them. Apart from the diminishing returns of lecturing, either the material is memorable or it's not. If it's not, organizing it clearly and repeating it three times can only be of marginal help. On the other hand, designing a workshop around entertainment, relevance, and meaning will always maximize its potential impact.

Entertainment

But I can't tell a joke. . . . While amusing stories and jokes are effective, entertainment is a much broader canvas than humor. There is no reason to be limited by a sober self-concept. Some workshops lend themselves to being entertaining

throughout, while others may work better if you to design specific *entertainment portions*.

Do not underestimate the impact of simply varying the pace and activities of the workshop as primary methods of entertaining. Energy has its own entertainment value. By asking what will add energy to the experience, a workshop planner goes far toward designing an entertaining experience. For example, when audio/visual inserts raise the group's energy or heighten concentration, they make an entertaining addition. If not, they are relatively worthless.

Don't be seduced by imagining that the supposed importance of the information can obviate the need to provide entertainment. Planning for this need is more than half the battle.

Relevance

Plan to be *audience-centered* as much as possible. Presumably, your workshop will capitalize on some inherent match between the audience and the material. Still, this is far from enough to guarantee relevance. The best workshop planners will move the material from theoretical relevance to actual relevance by establishing immediacy.

A preliminary assessment of need, either by survey before the presentation or early in the presentation itself, can help you to focus on your specific audience. If a survey of the complete audience is impossible, perhaps a few participants can be interviewed in detail. Keep in mind, however, that surveys, whether formal or casual, are to help you design the workshop; they are not a substitute for planning. Although it is useful to discover what participants would like to accomplish, it is not enough just to ask them at the outset, in lieu of advance planning.

As the expert of the moment, you should be able to bounce among a variety of planned options as the needs and temperament of the group come forward.

The relevance of the workshop should be updated throughout the presentation. If you have engineered an experience with ongoing participation by the group, it may happen automatically. Another approach is to utilize specific decision points throughout, either for the direction of the workshop as a whole or by breaking into affinity groups.

Personal Meaning

By helping participants to capture personal meaning, you will heighten relevance, but they are not the same. While relevance is established for the whole group or broad segments of the group, meaning manifests itself person by person. Even when relevance is high, it is far from inevitable that personal meaning will attach. Participants need the opportunity to relate material to their own opinions, emotions, histories, and hopes.

It often works to ask all participants to take a silent stand on an issue by committing an opinion or choice to writing. Then by forming small groups with the task of reaching consensus, the leader can often stimulate an active learning environment, packed with personal nuance. If opinions are likely to be overly adversarial, the large group can be polled in constructive ways, resulting in small groupings of like-minded participants. Variations on the theme of moving from individual sentiment to group compromise are endless, with only the goal of identifying personal meaning remaining the same.

In the picture-taking workshop described above, we were enter-

tained by the challenge of taking good photographs and by the mystery of what we would be doing with them. The entire experience was highly relevant because we learned an excellent language experience activity for our children and because we generated a collective theory of curriculum development. And we attached personal meaning right away by capturing and communicating emotional images from our past. Perhaps our instructor had led the same workshop many times . . . no matter; it felt freshly planned for us.

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