You get all the do-overs you want: The Benefits of Recorded Presentations

Seth Matthew Fishman

Villanova University

The concluding weeks of my graduate courses are dedicated to student presentations of their final projects and research papers. Each student generally has about 15 minutes of "stage time" to deliver their presentation and field a few audience questions. Despite no limitations on the types of platforms and ways to deliver their presentation (I still await an interpretative dance), almost all the students play it safe with a Power Point. As faculty, we have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly of PowerPoint presentations. Some things are easily fixed and include telling presenters the basics:

1. Stop reading off the screen
2. Stop reading off your notes
3. 12-point font is never a good idea
4. Ditto comic sans fonts
5. You only get one super fancy slide transition opportunity
6. You should probably run spell check
7. An embedded video almost never seems to work
8. 30 slides for a 10-minute presentation is over 10 minutes
9. Project your voice [maybe this is more my issue as I have aged]

And these basics do not capture the challenge and even fear of public speaking for many of our students (APA, 2013). For some, it is anxiety, and for others, perhaps a language or communication challenge that is not their own fault (see LeFebvre et al., 2018 for a comprehensive list of internal and external factors). Public speaking is an acquired skill and one that I still find myself working on. I am certainly empathetic. I also find that the odds of our future higher education leaders speaking for more than 15 minutes formally to groups outside of academic conferences is minimal. Still, most presentations were fine, and these same students improve as they matriculate our graduate program after receiving feedback and delivering other presentations.

Nevertheless, there is another logistical challenge that faculty and students are familiar with. We are a BYOD campus – bring your own device -- and the faculty podium has a switchboard along with a half dozen plugs to accommodate different devices. In most classrooms, there is a handy laminated guide informing you of the color-coded wires and how to generally operate the projector. Learning all this technology is never simple: I recently learned how to control the automated blinds in one building, which was quite a revelation, but mostly an accidental discovery.

Prior to the pandemic, students would bring their laptops or borrow mine, using a flash drive (remember those?), which I would pray would not infect my computer. I estimated that each class session, we lost about 10 minutes fumbling around with the plugs ("anyone have a Mac iPad adapter?") and video. If there was not an immediate solution, the student would email me a supersized PowerPoint file that I would then download and run on my laptop, which would cost about five minutes of time and lose momentum as students checked their social media accounts. #TechFails

In Fall 2020, teaching the History of US Higher Education, there were two presentations required. The students had two choices: to present live, via Zoom, or pre-record a 10-minute presentation, which we would watch as a class, then jump into the Question and Answer part for a few minutes. This reminded me of the importance of universal design for learning by providing multiple options to demonstrate learning through different types of expression (CAST, 2018). And it was a game changer from my virtual podium.

The recorded presentations provide plenty of 'do-overs', and students could record as many versions as they wished. This drastically reduced the stress and anxiety of delivering a live presentation, allowing students to slow down a bit in their delivery, re-record if they made an error, and adjust the volume and make visual changes more easily. I found they took more creative risks, too. For example, a student created a film noir detective theme video, complete with faux Bogart voiceovers and a special appearance from his daughter. This was the first video he ever made and had his fellow co-workers watch it in an advance screening. Another video was a voiceover worthy of Ken Burns admiration comparing the higher education response to the 1918 influenza pandemic to Covid.

The standard narrated PowerPoints were crisper, cleaner, and sounded like less script reading, though occasionally you could hear a page turn in the recording. The students sounded more confident and competent in their delivery. The ones that were less effective generally recorded themselves talking without any visuals to accompany their presentation – the same would hold true if they did this in-person. It seems that the fire-side chat approach does not translate well in video. Further, there were the usual Zoom challenges. "Ýou are on mute!" and the occasional family member or Dobby, my feline teaching assistant, popping in to say, "Hi," but those were usually met with excitement.

Overall, their presentation grades were higher than the in-person versions, and this held true the following semester in another hybrid course where they could present in the actual class session or watch their recorded presentation. A bonus was the ability to add captioning, even if the caption text occasionally bungled a few words.

As I prepare for the post-pandemic return the classroom, I plan on keeping the recorded presentation option and promoting this as the better alternative. It evens the playing field for those students who may have anxiety, stress, or do not like to be the center of attention, while allowing for more creativity. The students are always more creative and tech savvy than I am and providing what is a universal design for learning choice of multiple formats is worth keeping.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental health disorders* (5th ed.). Author.

CAST (2018). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2. Retrieved from http://udlguidelines.cast.org

LeFebvre, L., LeFebvre, L. E., & Allen, M. (2018). Training the butterflies to fly in formation: Cataloguing student fears about public speaking, *Communication Education, 67*(3), 348-362, doi: 10.1080/03634523.2018.1468915