

AID Conference 2004

Minutes for Session Named Public Speaking workshop

Date: Sunday, May 30, 2004

Time From: 3.45pm

To: 5pm

Minutes Taken By:

Nishant Jain

Number of attendees:

25

Audio/Visual Component?

No

Speaker/Panelist Names:

1. Bob Jensen

He is a professor of Journalism at the University of Texas, Austin. Active in various movements in and around campus, especially the no war collective.

<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/%/Erjensen/home.htm>

What they are speaking about:

A workshop for effective public speaking for activists.

Main Presentation:

Bob never had formal training in Public speaking, so he might say actually say something useful. When he says public speaking, its not of a particular kind i.e. speaking in front of a large audience. But public speaking for all kinds including one-on-one interaction, or standing in line in a grocery store. He recounts a personal experience of talking to a cab driver in Houston who listened to the Pacifica station in Houston, and how the conversation quickly turned into a political discussion.

Most of this session will not be about tricks and tips, as other workshops on the topic usually are. Its about what to speak and how to approach people we are going to engage. MLK Jr is a perfect example of rhetorical speaker. Effective public speaking is more often about telling stories. When public speaking becomes about facts and figures, there is no framework for the audience to understand. No hooks to hang the statistics on.

People do not get persuaded rationally. Telling stories that will resonate with people will help persuade them. It is hard to remember facts, easier to remember stories. We are storytelling animals. Though stories should have some kind of rational basis.

Humor is also important but it could also be dangerous. Except, for satire on the people at the top. Everyone resents people with power and money. Second, self-deprecating humor also works. Everyone else is a dangerous territory.

When speaking in public you are walking a fine line. You begin by Inviting them to your own space, and when you get them in then you try to create tension by changing their current beliefs or persuading them with your own argument. The reason being is that way we live is fundamentally immoral. Lifestyle of an affluent American will have to change. People at some level get that and it scares them. Create a safe space and then bring them in to tap their guilt. Effective public speaking is to do that strategically. You have to meet people where they are and not where you wish them to be. Meet them where they are and take them to some place new.

Remember the process of AAA. Audience, Analysis, Action.

Audience: If you do not know your audience, you will fail. True about writing and speaking both. Its not about demographics, who they are nor who you think they are. But more about who they think they are. Examples of US universities faculty who have a all-knowing egocentric view of themselves and orthodox Christians who think they are the kindest, gentlest people on the planet. One can start by feeding little of that faculty's ego or reciting the bible to the latter. So begin by stressing the commonalities. First seek common ground.

Analysis: You are not only there to inform them but also persuade them. Analysis that is in the form of their beliefs and values. Analysis that will motivate them and will be compelling. There is also tension in this. You do not want to play the ground too much or confront them too much. Usually base it on the gut, your own feeling.

Action: Finally, you want to persuade them to act. Give them specific actions that they can do. What can they do? Give them things to do once you have their attention. Things that they can do realistically within their own lives. Church groups are good example. When you have people at the moment, give them even trivial things. Writing letter to the congressman, WB or letters to the editor. What you are asking people has to be realistic.

Now about, One on One public speaking

For activists this is especially important for tabling on campuses and other events. Tabling is a fine art. Most important thing to think about is to understand that people are desperate for a

meaningful conversation. This is a culture that trains people to not be controversial. Creates an atmosphere where people want to talk but afraid to talk. When you are tabling, be aware of cues of the people. Read people's body language. Some people who look at the literature. Most come with a level of discomfort. Make a connection that is not about the issue. Start off friendly, put people at ease. Look for the common point. Where do you intersect. They are interested in your table as they find something of interest.

Give a short intro and watch for the reaction. And this back and forth for as far as you can go. Most important of all you must speak with honesty and self-disclosure. Telling stories engages the audience. People who have not been in the political space, have fear about the subject. Telling them about personal stories and rewards about the political work, will be effective. It models for the people, the way they can be in the world. Projecting a kind of authenticity. Passion motivates you.

Question/Answer Session:

Q: What about the conflict between the choice of asking for money and changing their opinions.

A: Some people can only give money. And that is the extent of the involvement. So take that and telling them about other things. We just accept that. All they need to be convinced about is that the money will be well used.

Q: Difference between your criticism and our (Indian) criticism at Bush.

A: I won't touch it. The racial issue will always be counterproductive, unless you know your audience very well.

Q: What about audience who are not there necessarily for AID but the events.

A: Keep it mind what they know about India. Notion of story telling will help. Diverse audience, so tell them something that they will remember. Move away from the controversial issues, but also do not give them completely into the charitable model.

Facts never speak for themselves. So must spin into stories.

Q: How to reach audience that is totally unreceptive.

A: Accept the fact some people are unreachable.

Begin the stories with a self-disclosure. Why am I there? What is my motivation? Not in all context but most.

Q: How to tie into the other progressive movements.

A: There are anti-war and anti-corporate / global justice movement which are the biggest. The stories that can unite this group and get them interested in micro-development efforts. Both work against the same stricture – concentrate power to a few. Opportunities that local groups can be brought into the fold. People look for ways to bring about a change.

Talk about global minimum wage for outsourcing, which could be productive.

Q: There seems to be no compelling Indian story. Africa, Latin America and central America all have stories.

A: India does not have a hook. US does not have a direct connection. It is not quite easy. There is a more general pitch. Current conditions could be a product of colonialism. But maybe, the nukes might play into irrational fear. Brown people will blow up the world. In the end, the argument is moral and altruistic. With progressive movements, tie into the American culpability. US foreign policy is always wrong.

Additional Notes/ Observations:

Excellent session. The audience swelled to about 25 from 16 over the course of the workshop. It was important to hear some lessons from a seasoned campaigner and activist. Effective communication, especially the oral form, is one of AID's weaknesses. The workshop will be tremendously beneficial for chapters who are starting out and to those mature chapters that have been frustrated by the lack of public response.