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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Five Structural Elements for Effective Instruction

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I've been reviewing instructional video presentations for a project. Primarily I screen them to review how effective the presenter is in applying sound pedagogy. It's amazing how many basic rules of good communication presenters break—consistently—even professional speakers and celebrated “master teachers.”

The other side of the equation that puzzles me is the level of tolerance audiences seem to have for poor presentations. I wonder sometimes if we've seen so few well-delivered presentations that we've lowered our expectations, and therefore, demand so little of presenters. Most of the presentations I see are entertaining but not educational, even when they portend to be.

Here are five elements that are consistently ignored or poorly handled by presenters—lecturers, instructors, or workshop leaders. If these had been given attention every presentation I reviewed would be improved tremendously.

Focus. Presenters need to have ONE focus for their presentation or lecture. The question to ask oneself is, “What is the ONE thing this presentation is about?” When you identify it, then stick to that one thing. The most powerful presentations make the “one thing” a *concept*, sometimes called a “big idea.” Therefore, the better question is, “What is the one concept I want to present?” To maintain focus, it is critical to avoid “scattered dialogue,” digressions, or any verbiage that is not on point. If something is not related to or derivative of your big idea, don't talk about it.

Scope. Scope has to do with coverage. Any one thing (concept) we choose as our focus can still be complex. The question is, “What is the cope of my treatment for this one thing I want students to learn and master?” Every element of the presentation—from illustration to visuals, should support and legitimately connect with the one concept you are presenting.

Pace. The brain has its own rhythm for how it processes information. One element is the role of “attention span.” People have a longer attention span than we give them credit for due to the brain's capacity to "chunk" and make connections with the information it receives; but we have to help students make the connection. One key to helping students process information is the pace of the presentation. An effective rule is to change the learner’s focus every five to seven minutes (using "stimulus variation"), and you want to shift the pace every ten to fifteen minutes.

Acquisition. In order for your presentation to be meaningful to the learners, they must be able to “acquire” the concept you are trying to teach. Students cannot learn what they don't understand. The question is, “Do my listeners comprehend what I am communicating?” Therefore, you need to build in points of “testing for comprehension” throughout your presentation. This includes testing for misunderstanding and providing correctives. The flow is: (1) provide exposition, (2) assess comprehension, (3) provide correctives, (4) link to previous, (5) bridge to what is next.

Application. The final element that most often is missing from presentations is application. If your listeners or students are not able to *immediately* apply, at some level, what you are presenting then (1) it is not meaningful to them, and, (2) it will result in a failure of retention. If you cannot make immediate application of the one concept you are teaching, then your learners will tend to forget it as soon as they walk out the door.

The next time you prepare a lecture, class, session, or workshop presentation, check to see how well you address each of the five elements for effective instruction.

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