Learning from Mistakes

Most presenters know well the letdown that comes when a presentation is not as successful as it could have been. In this article the author takes a hard, honest look at why presentations falter, and suggests some strategies for self-evaluation and improvement. Bill Strong is co-director of the Utah Writing Project.

The jaw of the tape deck yawned open, and I popped in a cassette. I wanted to compare my memory of the presentation with its recorded reality. Secretly, though, I was wishing for one or two of Garrison Keillor’s Powdertalk Biscuits, guaranteed “to give shy folks the courage to do what needs to be done.”

Tension began to build as I listened to the conference coordinator’s generous introduction. Again I tested fingertips against my face, and again they were icy, a sure sign of nervousness. And then I stood before a crowd of 400, hearing the feedback of my voice through the PA system as an inner voice tried to stem the flow of adrenaline.

To my surprise, I found that I had started off well enough. The audience laughed, and I did too. I moved into the opening section of my talk, highlighting what we would be doing. Occasionally there would be a moment’s eye contact, but the audience was really a blur—points of opaque, shimmering color, like a Monet painting.

Now into the tape, I closed my eyes and tried to hear my message for the first time. I imagined myself as part of the audience and asked, “What’s in this for me?”

The structure was clear enough, and so were the sentences; yet, somehow, nothing was happening. I saw little imagery and heard no story. The speaker’s voice asserted and supported, qualified and defended, to make point after point. But where were the analogies and everyday examples? Where were the here-and-now reference points and the shared meaning? And, most importantly, where was the laughter?

I had not been an indifferent or hostile group, the kind I sometimes worked with in after-school sessions while the rally squad practiced just down the hall. Rather, these were skilled, sensitive teachers who had left classroom chores behind to meet midweek in a superbly organized conference. And I had done my homework: a carefully scripted text, plus an outline of major points on a handout, and even a joke to get things started. If anything, I was overprepared.

When the tape was over, I clicked off the player and remembered the pain of polite applause. My mouth had felt very dry, and my stomach was clenched like a fist. As I compared myself in substance and style to the other presenters—all models of grace and eloquence and humor—I had felt inept and out of my league.

The Sailboat Capsizes

Not that my failure had been like the sinking of the Titanic. More like that sunny afternoon when I had rigged a newly purchased sailboat and headed out alone across a mountain reservoir. I’d been nervous then, too, but the sailboat’s yellow hull had seemed so cheery and its white, crisp sails so optimistic that I’d thrown caution to the gusty wind. I’d manage, I had told myself. Minutes out from the dock, with mainsail and jib up, I was holding tight to the rudder when I felt an invisible hand begin to tip the boat’s mast toward the horizon. It was an exquisite ballet of natural forces—the wind and sky reaching to meet the water, the sheets cleated, my hands locked tight.

I had gone under the boat as it went over. When I came up, the sails were filling with water. In seconds, despite my protest, the centerboard was pointing skyward and the mast—all seventeen feet of it—was exploring the reservoir’s murky depths where my prescription sunglasses were still sinking.

Moments later, as I bobbed helplessly in a new yellow lifejacket, I began to understand what I had not paid attention

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to in the sailboat showroom: that the boat’s deep-draft hull, when filled with water, made it impossible for one person to right. Finally, with help from power-boat samaritans, I had saved the craft by getting it ashore. But I had felt like a fool for not paying attention to a design flaw so fundamental that it was downright dangerous.

I was thinking about design flaws now: how I had gone deeply and profoundly wrong in preparing for my talk. Somehow, I had taken myself too seriously on the one hand, not seriously enough on the other hand. During the presentation, I could feel my hand frozen on the rudder, unable to let go.

I pictured the sailboat, lying on its side in shallow, muddy water. After taking down the sails and bailing out the boat as best I could, I had walked it toward the docks and vowed that I’d be better prepared—prepared in a different way—the next time out. And now I was asking myself: Was it possible to learn from mistakes in this context as well?

The question of change—of learning from mistakes—is hardly a trivial one for a staff-development model such as NWP. As we evaluate the quality of our in-service work and make adjustments for future presentations, change seems linked to professional becoming.

So how does a person of reasonable wit learn from mistakes? Day-to-day experience suggests that rather than learning from our less-than-glorious moments, we often repeat them, coaxing them toward perfection. We are, as the saying goes, creatures of habit. And habits, especially those deeply embedded in our thinking or behavior, can seduce us time after time.

Learning from Others

For me, a first step in learning from mistakes came from paying attention to presenters whom I respected. Because I was curious about what they did, these people became my “unwitting collaborators,” to use Frank Smith’s phrase. According to Smith, much of our learning, including our learning about language, is vicarious rather than a direct result of our own learning trials. Smith says that “we all occasionally catch ourselves unwittingly talking or otherwise behaving like a person who has impressed us in some way, the kind of person we see ourselves as being like, without any practice or rehearsal. Someone else has done something, and we have learned.” (Smith, p. 9)

A second step came as I asked other presenters to talk about the craft of working with an audience. At this level of more overt collaboration, Smith again provides food for thought:

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The person who helped me most was Don Graves, a man of immense personal charm privately and charisma publicly. I asked him how he presented, and he took time to explain his process in astonishing detail. Although I’ll never be able to do what Graves does—no one else can, either—I won’t soon forget that conversation. Part of it occurred on an afternoon run, with me (several years younger) struggling to keep pace.

Graves explained that having learned from his mistakes, he never works from a prepared text these days. Instead, he consciously creates one with the audience. The first five minutes and the last five minutes of his presentations are carefully rehearsed; this to ease his nervousness and give him confidence; but he deliberately leaves the middle open, loosely organized around two or three basic points, to create some internal tension for himself. Tension, he knows, leads to on-the-spot discovery, both for himself and the audience. No discovery for the speaker, he says, means no discovery for the audience.

Image is central, Graves believes. He tries to create clear images not so much for an audience as with them. He and the audience work together, he says, because as he shows what he has in mind, people “see” his meaning. He likes to use poems for much the same reason—because poems evoke emotion and because they work through indirect rather than direct language, inviting inference. Finally, he says, there must be laughter. Humor relaxes people, setting up the serious points he wants to make. If you can tie image, emotion, and laughter together, Graves contends, you have a powerful combination for teaching.

Self as Change Agent

Considering my own experience of learning from mistakes, I see that the process is difficult for at least three reasons.

First, there is the problem of separating “what happened” from one’s own perceptions. In other words, we are hardly disinterested spectators of our own behavior. Second, there is the problem of built-in biases toward ourselves, either favor-
able or unfavorable. We have all known people whose view of themselves differs markedly from those around them. Third, there is the problem of change itself. Consider for a moment the curious fate of New Year’s resolutions.

A collaborative perspective on learning from mistakes recognizes both the responsibility of the individual to initiate change and the responsibility of collaborators—say, within a writing project—to monitor and support it. In other words, change that feels good results from something we do, not from something that is done to us. Self is the true “change agent.”

Perhaps the first step, once we are interested in change, is to gather information about what is happening. If the context is professional development, a tape recorder or VCR provides far more useful feedback than typical evaluation forms, especially at first. Obviously, it is helpful to know how others regard a particular workshop. But comments, whether general or specific, do not speak as clearly as the recreated event, unfiltered by the perceptions and language of others. If evaluation forms are used, they should probably be an adjunct to technology, not a substitute for it.

A second possible step involves dialogue with a “trusted other”—perhaps another Teacher Consultant, the inservice coordinator, or members of an ongoing response group. A tape is played, then discussed. This is “reality testing,” an event much like a roundtable discussion of writing during the Summer Institute. As in the Institute, collaborators take time to listen, reflect, question, sympathize, probe, hint, argue, and encourage. In other words, responders pay attention. Having someone else take our efforts seriously (or playfully) may help us verbalize a goal and a plan to achieve it.

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The third step, the difficult one, centers on change itself. When it gets down to it, we resist change because it is lonely, difficult business; and we often decide, usually by default, to live with “the way things are.” It is as if we regard our mistakes as friends. After all, who are we to put self-defeating thoughts, bad habits, or nasty compulsions out in the cold? They may not be the best friends to have around, but surely they are better than no friends at all. And if they do take advantage of us from time to time, even doing us real harm, we still forgive them and welcome them home.

And that, of course, is where real friends can prove helpful. They help us remember what is at stake in the goals we have set for ourselves. The responsibility is still ours, of course, but friends pull on our end of the psychological rope. Why? Because they belong to our “literacy club”—the Writing Project—and therefore share our commitments. And that, in the final analysis, is what will enable us to learn from mistakes, not just repeat them.

References

Frank Smith, Joining the Literacy Club: Further Essays into Education. (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH), 1988.