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# 1 Personal Development: Speaking to an Audience

Developing your ability to speak to an audience is one of the greatest benefits you'll ever get from your time in further or higher education. We've said 'developing', because it's likely that you've already had some experience of giving a talk, perhaps at school, for a club you belong to or in your place of work if you're a mature student. You will now have the chance to practise speaking effectively in a range of situations and in front of audiences of differing backgrounds and levels of knowledge. If you make the most of these opportunities, you will be gaining expertise which will be vital for your future, and which may change you in ways you didn't expect when you began.

Let's look first at the practical outcome of your speaking abilities. A great deal is spoken and written nowadays about 'transferable skills' that you can carry into your future, whether you're going to stay in academic life, teach or follow any of the multitude of job opportunities that will present themselves. In years to come, you may well change not only jobs but also your career itself: it's possible to see an opportunity that you never dreamed of, and so to follow a new and exciting career path that you didn't know about when you first left education. Transferable skills are those that you can take with you: they're valuable for the rest of your life. The ability to speak well enough to interest, influence or persuade other people is a major asset, whatever you choose to do in the future.

You may also find that you gain in a more personal way. Many people are worried about talking to an audience and this is understandable – you may feel both nervous and vulnerable when you look for the first time at a roomful of people waiting to listen to you. It's a natural reaction and, as we'll discuss later, in itself absolutely nothing to worry about. Most truly excellent speakers are nervous at the prospect of speaking. But – and this is the great advantage of having a go – once you've made a successful presentation, you will gain enormously in confidence. This in itself means that you are likely to make an even better presentation next time. Your

newfound confidence may well affect other areas of your work, too: lecturers sometimes comment that after students have made their first presentation, they are more ready to ask questions, respond to a challenge and organise themselves and their work more effectively.

You will be preparing a personal development plan (PDP), probably in discussion with your tutor. This will give you the opportunity to think about yourself, how you learn, what motivates you and so on. Part of this process is to help you to assess how your subject knowledge and career management skills are developing; among the latter you will be thinking about your transferable skills and how confident you are in using them. This book will help you with the specific skill of talking to an audience, not just as part of your coursework but also in your leisure time, whether you decide to become a student representative or just want to make a contribution at a society meeting. So what is involved in public speaking, and what influences us if we're in the audience?

When we talk to other people, whether formally or in conversation, we use at least three different techniques: we vary our voices, use changes of tone and reveal body language, a silent but eloquent way of sending a message. People's voices have qualities that may be attractive or unattractive: a low voice is usually easier to listen to than a high-pitched voice, a harsh quality of voice can sound aggressive even when its owner feels at ease, a very soft voice may be pleasant at first, but becomes irritating if we, the listeners, have to concentrate hard to catch the words. Such qualities are not easy to change, but we're generally aware that we will speak more loudly if we're annoyed, more softly in an intimate setting, rapidly if we're agitated and probably more slowly if we're not sure how to put across an idea.

Tone of voice is also very powerful in showing our meaning. Think of the many ways in which you can say something as simple as 'Thank you'. You can sound truly grateful, fully appreciative of the trouble someone has taken on your behalf, casual almost to the point of rudeness or impatient and sarcastic if you're not really feeling grateful at all. We use differences of tone to reflect an emotional response beyond the straightforward meaning of our words.

It's much harder to control our body language. This is conditioned largely by the cultural framework in which we grew up, but also by the situation in which we find ourselves at the time and the emotions we're feeling as we speak. It can reveal a state of mind which we'd prefer to keep quiet about, and in this way body language is both dangerous and important: it can give away responses we'd rather keep hidden, and it can either reinforce or contradict the words we use. Needless to say, we shall be looking at non-verbal communication (body language) in detail when we discuss making a presentation and attending an interview.

We've mentioned words, which are, of course, the principal medium for communicating our ideas to other people. Choosing the 'right' words is also a complex procedure, as it depends upon the meaning we want to convey, the person receiving the message and the situation in which the communication takes place. Out of the enormous range of words available in the English language, we have to choose those which most accurately reflect our meaning, and this is by no means an easy decision. Think of the words that can be used to convey the idea of a pleasant feeling of general goodwill: *cheerfulness, jollity, merriment, pleasure, joy, happiness*. We can see at once that these words have similar meanings but they aren't interchangeable: *merriment* might last only for a moment or two at the end of a joke, while *joy* suggests a much deeper and more lasting emotion. If we want to influence an audience, we have to choose our words carefully so that they reflect our meaning as closely as possible.

Our choice of words is also conditioned both by the person who is going to hear them and the situation in which we find ourselves. If we're talking to a friend, we can usually be informal, even careless about our words, knowing that the recipient will understand our meaning even if we don't express ourselves very clearly; if we are speaking to a prospective employer, we will be much more formal and careful about the words we choose. If our friend is part of a large audience to which we're giving a formal presentation, the situation will override the individual and our approach will be formal in spite of the presence of the friend.

If speaking is clearly an art we need to think about carefully, so too is listening. We depend on the goodwill of the people who hear our words: do they really want to listen? Do they know how to interpret our tone of voice and our body language? Are they preoccupied with their own thoughts? Is their knowledge of the language we're speaking good enough for our purposes? We'll be looking at some aspects of the listening process in more detail later, and suggesting ways in which we can help our listeners to concentrate on our message.

In your course, you'll be expected to listen well and speak effectively. This will be in one-to-one situations, for example at meetings with your tutor, in small groups such as seminars and as you make formal presentations, perhaps as part of a team. Many of these occasions will be assessed, some as part of your final exam result. In your leisure time, you will want to make the most of opportunities to join clubs and societies, and take a leading role when the time is right. You may want to stand for election to office and, if you're elected, may then have to introduce outside speakers and chair meetings. You may represent your student group on an important and influential body such as your hall of residence management committee or university senate.

#### 4 Presentation Skills for Students

All these responsibilities depend to a large extent on your ability to speak clearly, concisely and convincingly. If you can do this, not only will you be making the most of your academic and social life, but you will also have developed both personal confidence and a useful, transferable skill to take into your future career.

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