

How to give a good talk

Patrick Blackburn

INRIA, Lorraine

Student Session, Helsinki ESSLLI, 23 August 2001

Why I am giving this talk ...

- Because Raffaella Bernardi asked me to.
- Because I like listening to good talks.
- Because I like giving good talks — but this isn't always easy.
And it is even harder to stand back and pin down what it is that makes a talk good.
- In essence, this talk is an attempt to isolate a few of these factors, and then to zoom in on what I believe is the real answer.

Where we are going today...

The talk has two main parts:

- **How to give a talk.** A series of questions for you to ponder. I don't believe there are one-size-fits-all answers to these questions, and I don't even believe that finding answers to these questions is what ultimately leads to good talks. Nonetheless, it is important to think about them.
- **How to give a good talk.** I give an answer which I believe works.

What is the talk for?

- To explain your work to an audience of specialists?
- **To explain your work to a general audience?**
- Student session at ESSLLI?
- Job talk?
- Project appraisal?

How should I present the talk?

- Read a paper?
- Handout?
- Blackboard?
- Slides?
- Beamer?

Is my talk too detailed?

- Do I really need 15 slides containing very large feature structures?
- Do I really need so many detailed sequent-calculus proofs to make my point about long distance dependencies in old Albanian clear?
- Do I really need to prove the theorem in full generality, or are there special cases which reveal the key idea?

Is my talk detailed enough?

- Am I really a good enough speaker to pull off a talk based upon nothing but the bald assertion of generalities?

Is my presentation vivid?

- Have I really tried hard enough to make the audience feel the basic ideas?
- Isn't there a way of making my talk more concrete, to ensure contact with my audience? Are there enough examples? Should I start with the examples?

Does the audience know where I'm heading?

- Have I paid attention to the following slogan:
 - Say what you're going to say.
 - Say it.
 - Say that you've said it.
- Have I linked forward, and linked back?

Do I have an iceberg?

- Earnest Hemingway said that a good short story was like an iceberg: ninety percent of it was invisible.
- A good talk is like that: it's a condensation of a much longer story — but the parts that you've had to leave out make their presence felt if you've done your job properly.

Have I managed my time?

- Most of the time at least, don't overrun — it breaks the fundamental contract you have with the audience.
- Short talks are often the best ones.
- Know when to stop.

Am I using my space?

- Do you know your space?
- Do I feel comfortable here, and if not, what can I do about it?

What if I get nervous?

- Try to learn to use it.
- Sometimes it's an indication that there's something unresolved in your talk — and if handled right, this can lend spontaneity to your presentation.

Finally

- Experiment!
- Look at other speakers. Try and pin down exactly what it was that made you like (or dislike) a particular presentation.

But we're only scratching at the surface

- These are just safety nets...
- Making a wise choice from these options won't guarantee that you give a good talk. At best they may stop you from giving a bad on.
- So: how do I give a good talk?
- Better to ask: **where do good talks come from?**

Honesty

Let's go back to basics

- We are all researchers here, some just starting out, others more experienced.
- Our job is to isolate interesting questions, find out what's already known about them, and then try to contribute something original ourselves.
- Moreover, we have to **communicate** what we're doing to fellow researchers.
- The basis of successful communication is honesty, and honesty comes into play at a number of levels.

Presenting ideas honestly

- Good talks generate questions, as well as providing answers, because good communicators talk about the weaknesses of their work, as well as its strengths.
- Good speakers also try to isolate what is truly important in their work — and get it across in the simplest form possible. This requires a honesty — it can be tempting to try and make your ideas seem deeper and more complex than they really are. This is self-defeating, at both the personal and public levels.

But honesty enters into communication at still deeper levels

- A good talk brings the speaker and the audience into a communicative union that that is both mysterious and highly effective.
- It is not really clear why that happens. As everyone at ESSLLI knows, the deeper workings of language remain a mystery.
- But we **do** know how to use language, even if we don't fully understand why it works — and the more we bring of ourselves to a communicative act, the more interesting the results are likely to be. . . .

Here comes that iceberg again . . .

- The iceberg is not simply the details you had to leave out of your talk.
- Everyone has their own iceberg. It made up of your cultural background, your friends, your family — and your teachers, your students, the researchers you have worked with.
- It adds up to a unique perspective on the problem you are working on — and in a good talk, that iceberg is there, informing what you say, and enabling the audience to tune in.
- Honesty is about getting in touch with your iceberg.

And this is what science is all about

- Good science needs steady step-by-step progression — but the real gains come from subtle shifts of perspective that lead to truly new insights.
- Honest communication maximizes the chances that these will occur.
- A good department is an environment where communication happens more or less effortlessly.
- A good talk packs up your previous experiences (in iceberg format!) and transfers them to a wider audience.

And there's something in this for you

- Audiences like honesty.
- They know when someone is making a genuine effort to communicate, and will forgive/overlook presentational shortcomings if they see this.
- **Most importantly, this approach is the only one I know that offers a real chance of conveying your ideas to busy people with their own interests.**

Summing up

- Music should never stray too far from dance (Stravinsky).
- Poetry should never stray too far from the spoken word (Pound)
- A good talk should never stray too far from simple honest communication.
- So by all means work on your presentational skills — and don't forget to experiment with them — but don't miss the wood for the trees. At the end of the day, a good talk is all about reaching your audience as honestly as you can.