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Courses: Public speaking; communication courses requiring speeches.
Objective: To teach students how to apply humor principles to speeches through a slideshow method supportive of this goal, and to become more discerning about the possibilities and pitfalls of humorous communication.
Keywords: Pecha Kucha; Humor; Speech; Communication

To promote more energetic and engaging presentations, architects in Japan invented the Pecha Kucha slideshow method (hereafter, PK) to rein in the often verbose, bullet-point filled, and boring practices of typical *PowerPoint* speeches (Pink, 2007). The PK format challenges speakers to deliver only 20 timed slides for 20 seconds each, applying a structural change that encourages simple designs (e.g. only one image or a few words/sentences per slide) and a pace fitting for the attention spans and media habits of modern audiences. Building on core lessons in excellent speech practices and slide design, PK presentations can effectively introduce students to an optional unit on entertaining communication.

In fields as diverse as psychology, marketing, and nursing, empirical assessments have found support for the PK method's value. In one study, those selecting the PK style had higher quality presentations, and in another, higher audience ratings than those using the traditional *PowerPoint* format (Beyer, 2011). Scholars have found superior group and individual assessments for PK presentations (Oliver & Kowalczyk, 2014), demonstrating improved focus, delivery, and "resulting in the students speaking to the audience and not to the slides" (Masters & Holland, 2012, p. 536).

For over a decade, I have had undergraduate, graduate, and executive students practice PK speeches in communication courses. I began to notice that, compared to traditional slideshows, the very structure of PK speeches tends to support the development of students' humor. The communication field has generally put the weight of its pedagogical practices on

informative and persuasive speaking, so one next step is develop methods for teaching

entertaining communication (Waisanen, 2015). A host of research now supports the capacity for

positive forms of humor to improve health, interpersonal, and rhetorical and civic

communication (Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield, & Wanzer, 2007; McGhee, 2010a;

Rossing, 2016; Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006). Other disciplines have even developed entire

programs for college classes on the topic (McGhee, 2010b). Following this work, this essay will

show how instructors can use PK presentations toward the end of a speech course to help

students critically assess and exercise humor skills.

Description of the Activity

This activity is best carried out late in a semester, after students have practiced

informative and persuasive speaking and as an extension of lessons on evidence-based methods

for slideshows (see Alley, 2013). Tell the class that everyone will learn about humorous

communication skills through a slideshow structure supportive of this goal. After an overview of

the PK presentation and how it differs from a traditional *PowerPoint*, show the class a video of a

PK speech. I like to use an exemplary PK presentation that a previous student has given in my

classes (with their permission), but for illustration purposes I'll use Steven Hill's "How to Get

100 Hits on Your Blog" for explaining the principles below (http://bit.ly/2c7hGGE).

Open up a discussion about situations in which PK speeches might be appropriately used.

I highlight that a PK speech could work well for a holiday party where staff want to share some

insightful and humorous highlights from their year together, but it probably wouldn't be fitting

for a eulogy or serious policy speech. Building on the semester's lessons, I also underscore that

the PK speech design should be primarily driven by the message, goals, and audience rather than

the technology itself.

Next, facilitate a discussion about humor. Instructors should introduce some potential differences between positive and prosocial humor versus harmful and disparaging forms (see DiCioccio, 2012; Meyer, 2000). Opening up a 30 minute or longer discussion about moments when humor can be used for good or ill in society gets students engaged and thinking more critically about the topic. You can ask students to provide examples of when humor unites or divides people, or moments when it either preserves or challenges the status quo. For many students, conducting this critical analysis about humor both before and after the activity can be one of its most valuable lessons.

To put the class at ease, I tell everyone that the goal of this assignment is *not* to become a stand-up comedian and generate continuous laughter, but simply to get *some* experience in trying to inform and entertain. The main purpose is to try presenting an informative topic in a fun and amusing way using humor techniques. Emphasize that attempting to entertain is only one tool among the many strategies public speakers can employ, and that the key lessons from the semester will still be reinforced as we explore this option. For instance, instructors might discuss failed humor, which ties directly to audience adaptation. If an attempt at humor doesn't go as expected, we can learn from comedians to read the room well and perhaps engage in light self-deprecation (e.g. late-night comics will often follow a failed joke with lines like "well, we're taking that one back to the writer's room").

After this discussion, tell students that, subject to instructor approval, they can choose to present on any topic they wish; for example, a speech on an emerging trend, little known facts about an animal, their visit to a different country, a new scientific phenomenon, or even something not generally known about politics or history. The goal is *not* to pick a funny topic.

Instead, they should first conduct research on a topic that their audience stands to learn from, and then try to apply some humor principles to the subject.

You'll also need to demonstrate how to create a timed PK slideshow. In *PowerPoint*, go to "Transitions" on the top toolbar, go to the far right hand side where it says "Advance Slide" and click the box that says "After: 00:00.00." Put in "20" in the middle zeros (so that it reads "After: 00:20.00"), which indicates that the slides should change every 20 seconds. Click the box to the left that says "Apply to all" so that this timed format is applied to every slide.

Finally, run a brief lesson on the following, established humor principles, noting how the PK *structure* aligns well with the development of humorous *content.* In other words, PK presentations tend to apply these interrelated principles within their very form, making entertaining communication easier. Instructors could use these as grading criteria, but they should be mainly used to provoke discussion about how students' speeches evidenced these principles, how humor might be applied further, and what critical lessons were learned:

- *Surprise:* in the PK format, speakers build an audience expectation that something "new" will occur every 20 seconds. Consistent with theories showing that humor should involve surprise or the release of tension (Morrealle, 2011), speakers can make their presentations more entertaining by peppering unexpected slides throughout their talk. One classic way to evoke surprise is through self-deprecation, or "turning one's problems into punchlines" (Carter, 2001). In the Steven Hill video mentioned above, the speaker continually uses surprising personal information, such as the slide about his sister commenting on his blog posts, or that he only wears green shirts.

- *Timing*: along similar lines, the pace of PK speeches encourage comic timing and free speakers from a need for an outline or notecards, promoting ad libbing and improvisation.

The speech should be well prepared, but since the timed slides don't stop, speakers should alternate quickly between talking about their slides and playfully connecting with their audience, being more animated than in a typical slideshow presentation where the pace is left up to the presenter. In the Hill video, the instructor might note the ease with which the speaker alternates between pointing to the slides and promoting immediacy with his audience. Although the speech moves along quickly, the speaker should still respond to naturally occurring interruptions. If the audience looks confused by a slide image, emphasize that it's important to respond to that cue by, for instance, saying "to clear up any confusion, that image was a . . ."

- *Specifics*: with only 20 seconds allotted to each slide, speakers should create simple slides with minimal images or words/sentences on each. Even if using words, humorous language should be full of "pictures, sounds, and feelings" (Dean, 2000). In essence, PK speeches' structure encourages visual or imagistic content grounded in concrete details rather than vague abstractions—a standard for all good slideshows (Alley, 2013). In the Hill video, the speaker uses specific language in blog post he titled, "Friend of a Friend's Parents' Friend's Son's Wedding Reception."

- *Incongruity*: juxtapositions between two unlike items form the basis for much humor (Morrealle, 2011). PK speeches offer an opportunity for quick contrasts between images or words. To use incongruity effectively, the general direction should be from "sense to nonsense" (Helitzer, 2005); that is, use information the audience can relate to and make sense of first before moving to what is incongruous for humorous effect. There's also a performative incongruity created by the speaker alternating between the timed slideshow structure and trying to connect with the audience in an improvisational fashion. In the

Hill video, the progression from one slide recommending "Add Interesting Pictures," to the next "Add Boring Pictures" provides a simple incongruity.

- *Compactness:* different than stories, which take a long time to build to their point, humor tends to be far more compact and premise-based (Carter, 2001). With your slides changing every 20 seconds, you also have an opportunity to offer a series of "bits" for a routine. Students can even build entertaining "lists" into their presentations. In the Hill video, the instructor could note how most slides have a general premise with a specific, surprising example that acts as a punchline, as in the How to "Casually Mention Your Blog" slide. The delivery is compact and to-the-point as new content is unveiled.

Debrief and Variations

After presenting their PK speeches, have students first discuss examples of how their colleagues applied the humor principles across the presentations (e.g. "I enjoyed when Sarah used the cat meme . . ."). Encourage everyone to share at least one different example and use of a principle that they found noteworthy. The instructor should then highlight other examples not yet mentioned, and provide feedback on slides where each of the strategies could be applied even further (e.g. "Consider how it would have been even more 'surprising' if we'd discovered afterward that that's actually Sarah's cat"). Students enjoy getting to practice the PK method, welcome the chance to have fun with a late semester speech, and report learning about how formats like *PowerPoint* and strategies like humor might be used more effectively in general.

I have found two useful variations for this activity. One is to raise the stakes by making the time for each slide even shorter (e.g. 15 rather than 20 seconds, or what's been called the "Ignite" format: www.ignitetalks.io/) to emphasize comic timing. After each speech, time for questions and answers can also be provided to promote more audience interactions. Playing with

less time, you can additionally shorten the number of slides to give students a "trial run" of what these speeches look like and how they tend to entertain. Using six timed slides set to 10 seconds each (so each *PowerPoint* runs for one minute total), I have a deck of *PowerPoints* filled with random public domain images, which you can have student volunteers present prior to the assignment class. Some call this exercise "PowerPoint Karoake" (Tint, McWaters, & van Driel, 2015). When delivering the presentation, the students should pretend this is a speech that they have actually prepared, but since they have no idea what's coming up on each slide (i.e. underscoring the "surprising" strategy), the results are almost always spontaneous and entertaining. I draw attention to how each of the student speakers unwittingly applied the five humor principles across these impromptu, minute long presentations.

As noted, the PK assignment provides a good opportunity to open up conversations about humor's functions and effects in general, especially how it might be carried out with rhetorical and cultural sensitivity (see Waisanen, 2015). After the speeches, re-engage a discussion about humor's appropriateness and value in different situations. In particular, offer students a space to talk about moments when we might take more critical pause over the use of humor or entertainment in speeches and society writ large. Instructors can also tell students that the PK format may not be suitable for speeches requiring slower analysis and greater depth, and that there's some evidence that audience recall from these speeches tends to be the same as traditional *PowerPoints* (Beyer, Gaze, & Lazicki, 2013). To practice a skill that for too long has remained on the sidelines of communication pedagogy, however, PK speeches promise a level of energy, engagement, and insight that every communication teacher should consider.

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