An Open Letter to Scholarship of Teaching Presenters

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Dear Presenters,

I'm your biggest fan and your worst critic. You see, like most instructors in academia, the majority of my work revolves around teaching. Given my predilection towards teaching and teaching-related activities, I often attend conferences, pre-conferences, sessions, and workshops geared toward improving and innovating my and others' teaching. I'm also one of those psychologists whose audience is primarily future schoolteachers, so I am doubly cognizant about how university teaching models good and bad practice.

Over the recent years, I've noticed a growing disparity in the quality of presentations and posters during teaching-related conferences. Many presentations are bad examples of "good teaching," sending me and other attendees away cringing. I think that the presenters come in good faith, intending to present a valuable idea, but subsequently neglect some basic tenets of what makes for a good presentation. At the same time, I think that presenting scholarship of teaching should be held to a high(er?) standard given the nature of the content (Halpern et al., 1998). Time away from university work to attend a conference should be filled with great inspirational talks making attendees' minds swirl with ideas, optimism, and hope for better lessons. Instead, some presentations are lackluster or appear to be treated as less significant than their research-related siblings.

Like my fellow attendees at these sessions, I engage with the information attentively and evaluate the authenticity of the content presented and the presenter. In my mind, I am asking, "Do I buy this info? Will it help me?" I have found that, like undergraduate instructors, scholarship of teaching presenters fall into the same "pet peeves" noted by Perlman and McCann (1998): poor organization, teaching mechanics, lecture style, and technique. As a frequent audience member, I want to see dazzling presentations and hope that future presenters on the scholarship of teaching maximize their "presentations"[*] by thinking about the following:

1. *Talk positively about students*. Too many presentations begin with negative stereotypes about students not reading, not attending class, not paying attention, and not _____ (fill in the blank). As an audience member, this negativity puts me on the defensive because I hold out hope that my students are, and will be, different. In addition, I recognize that these presenters on the scholarship of teaching are reinforcing a stereotype that will result in a confirmatory information error. That is, if we instructors/audience members hear that students do not read at a teaching session, we then return to our classes and tend to engage in practices that result in students not reading — a self-fulfilling prophecy. Similar to the emergence of positive psychology and assets and strengths-based approaches for intervention, I want to hear teaching presenters take a positive approach and offer solutions to build on strengths in students instead of disparaging them.

2. *Sell your idea with confidence*. If you present at a teaching session, treat scholarship of teaching with

the same levels of professionalism and vigor about how your idea adds to the body of knowledge as if you were presenting at a research session. I have attended many presentations where the presenters begin by minimizing the impact of what their great idea did for teaching and learning and how what is being discussed is not such a big deal. Do not apologize for your presentation. Believe in your product — we're already buyers! I went to one session where the speaker spent the first 10 minutes explaining why she had chosen fireworks bursting as the background to her slide and hoped that no one was offended. The pertinence of the background to the content of her presentation was lost to me. I went to another teaching presentation of an invited speaker who voiced her uncertainty at presenting her first PowerPoint. She continued to apologize each time her slides fell behind her speaking points. These acts of undercutting dissolve most of the authenticity of the content for the audience.

I assume that poster presenters want to share their ideas with a broad audience; hence, why they chose to submit a presentation. I like to interact with poster presenters who stand by their poster, handouts in hand, smiling and attentive toward passers-by. I want to be captivated by the enthusiasm and thought-provoking discussion, eager to have a copy of the poster and to follow its progress toward publication. Every idea you present should be treated as the best thing since sliced bread, and your audience should be sold. Your enthusiasm and excitement will make whatever you present an attractive offering.

3. *Learn your technology*. Remember that audience members have allocated time in their conference schedules to hear your ideas, not to see you struggle with technology. Do everything you can to anticipate and head off technological issues. First and foremost, the multitudes of portable media and networks allow all presentations to be loaded onto one laptop before presentation, thereby minimizing confusion. Even if it is impossible to coordinate this before the presentation, presenters should not need to switch out laptops — hello, flash drive! In addition, presenters can learn how to toggle the display screen so that it will filter through to the LCD projector. Generally, it is the function and the F8 (fn and F8) keys. On a Mac, it is Command and F1 (older models F7). Too many presentations are delayed because someone needs to hunt down an IT person to direct the display appropriately. Good teachers come prepared to teach.

4. *Technology should enhance, not detract from a presentation*. PowerPoint presentations should follow practices for a good presentation, if the intention is to teach well (Mester, 2006). Fonts should be large enough to be seen from all parts of the room. The presenter should not read directly from the slides. The spoken words and slides should flow together to convey a point. Presenters should avoid unnecessary animation, transitions, and sound effects. I went to one scholarship of teaching presentation at a regional conference and the presenter said, "I let my nine-year-old daughter do the animation and transitions, so hold on for a wild ride!" Needless to say, the presentation contained every spin, one-letter drop down, and sound effect that could be found. As an audience member, I thought the over-animated presentation devalued her information. The results of her project might have been revolutionary and stupendous, but the distracting animations made the findings seem less important. Now, I don't want to sound curmudgeonly — presentations should be bright and fun! But, the bells and whistles need to enhance the value of the information to the audience

For posters, size matters (of the fonts, that is). Conference organizers almost always send a notice of the size of space of poster boards for display. The poster presentation should reflect the size of the space. The idea of a poster session is for individuals to walk by, stop, and read your information from a few feet away. Font sizes then need to be large enough and legible enough for them to read your presentation

at a distance (Welch & Waehler, 1996). Printing out ordinary 8 ½ " x 11" paper with 12 point fonts and tacking them to the board does not make for a good poster. The poster on display represents your work but also represents you as an instructor. Posters that are colorful, legible, and clearly indicate what they are about draw me in and make me want to learn. Marek, Christopher, and Koenig (2002) offer an excellent summary on the value of poster presentations as a learning experience and a tool for presentation. As individuals interested in teaching, I would hope that the poster presentations reflect the enthusiasm for teaching and convey excitement effectively.

5. *Use active learning*. For some reason, many presenters confuse "presentation" with speech making. Very few presenters can captivate an audience merely by speaking. Instead, think of the presentation as an opportunity to actively teach the content of your lesson. Chickering and Gamson (1978) advise that learners "must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves." It would seem logical that scholarship of teaching presenters would want to model effective teaching practices by demonstrating active learning in their own sessions. In addition, audience members are more likely to gain understanding by engaging in active, experiential learning. Everyone can learn active learning techniques and how to think about teaching and learning in active ways. If you don't know how to implement active learning, I would bet your campus has resources to help you. Your audience (and students) will thank you.

6. *Practice*. Too many speakers appear to think they can just wing it when they get there. A good presentation has a rhythm and flow to it. Its pace is fast enough to maintain attention and convey the point. Knowing what you're going to say and how you are going to say it will create a more powerful presentation.

7. *Be honest and clear about results*. Presenters often say, "It works!" about their project. I think many presenters assume that their project improves student learning. But, most of the time, they do not actually measure student learning. Student perception of learning may be measured, but that perception is not an objective measure of improvement in learning. Improving learning for a scholarship of teaching project is admirable and probably preferable (especially to some journal editors). However, changes in attitude and motivation in students are also important outcomes for disseminating scholarship of teaching. For me, if there's a project out there gets students excited about one particular piece of the curriculum, I'm sold, whether or not it improves performance. If students are more positive about one exercise, their positivity will spread. I would love to hear a presenter say at the outset whether or not the exercise, activity, or project improved performance or changed attitudes. This declaration lets the audience know clearly what the outcome was and also helps an instructor focus his/her own learning outcomes for students. If an instructor wants to increase students' excitement for certain content, having examples through scholarship of teaching sessions helps.

8. *Generalize your project*. Presenters sometimes describe projects with such specificity that they can not be generalized beyond the original setting. For example, in one presentation I attended, the presenter said that she received an external, specialized grant that allowed her to hire TAs and provided money to hire undergraduate students to tutor children. In addition, her Dean provided a course release to supervise the project. Honestly, the project was a great learning experience. However, for me to implement the same program requires greater resources than are likely available. Presenters should be mindful of ways to generalize the overall content of the project or activity. The not-so-underlying theme

should be: "Here's how you can adapt this project for your own use." At the outset, you must have thought others would want to hear about your project. The organizers of the conference must have thought so too if they allocated a time slot for your presentation. Your responsibility is to highlight the applicability of your idea for those in the audience.

9. *Aim high*. I have noticed that many teaching sessions, in the spirit of mentoring, are aimed at graduate students just beginning to assume teaching responsibilities. I would surmise that most courses in universities are being taught by faculty and not graduate students. Many instructors are interested in improving their teaching or incorporating innovative ideas (hence, why they attend scholarship of teaching sessions). Not every session needs to be focused on the beginner. Instead, focus on good practice and how your work adds to the body of knowledge or innovates on a typical practice. As an audience member, I gain quite a bit from my colleagues who understand the nuances of teaching and provide examples of what has worked well. Given their experience, these activities, when well presented, offer a readily adaptable activity that can be useful to any instructor, new or seasoned.

10. *Provide handouts*. When I attend a great session or see a good idea, I want to take it with me. Having a tangible piece of paper that describes your activity helps me review and adapt it to my own teaching. In addition, I like to have the presenter's name and contact information, in case I have a follow up question. Like many others, I keep a file of innovative teaching activities that may or may not immediately apply to a current teaching assignment, but when I need to freshen up a lesson, I look to the file. Bring enough copies to disseminate, even if it is a poster presentation. Handouts of poster presentations are just as important as those from individual paper presentations. I also think that when a presenter disseminates a handout, it conveys the message that the project merits distribution.

My last comment is one of commendation. Presenting about your own teaching requires bravery. It takes guts to analyze and share with others your personal take on teaching. I know that sometimes teachers get a feeling from students about what works well and what does not. Occasionally, these feelings may trickle through to student evaluations read by the instructor, after the term is over. But for many of us, we have to make a "case" for our own good teaching during retention, promotion, and tenure because we rarely share our teaching with others (although we should). So, presenting scholarship of teaching compels relinquishing some of the control we have within the classroom and displaying how we teach for all to see.

This exposure is a risk worth taking. I strongly support the idea that a rising tide will raise all boats. Among those who teach, the collective improvement of scholarship of teaching presentations will help raise the standard for teaching overall. I remain optimistic that the rising waters of good teaching will lift those who remain mired in mediocrity to jump on board and ride the current of innovation, change, and a better learning environment for students.

See you at the next conference!

Sincerely,

Rob Weisskirch

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*I use the term "presentations" generically to refer to lecture-type, PowerPoint-assisted, and poster presentations unless specifically noted.