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Supplementary Skills for Built Environment Researchers

Guide to communication and presentation skills

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Guide to communication and presentation skills

Introduction

This guide to communication and presentation skills for Built Environment researchers is prepared to provide some tips on how to enhance your skills and competence during your course of study. This is an outcome of a project funded by an Educational Development Grant through Centre for Education in the Built Environment (CEBE). The project, called SuSi-BER (Supplementary Skills for Built Environment Researchers), was conducted within the Research Institute for the Built & Human Environment (BuHu), the University of Salford.

There have been repeated calls for enhancing research and supplementary skills of the built environment researchers. Few would disagree that deepening specialised knowledge-base and wider skills of researchers in a variety of disciplines are prerequisite for developing successful leadership in higher education, the public sector and industry. We believe that, there is ample room for improvement in developing supplementary skills for quality research and researchers in the built environment. Further, as the modern society is changing in an unprecedented pace, you as an individual might realise the need to develop skills and competencies on a continual basis.

In this context, the project has been focusing on creating a foundation for creating, developing, and exploiting knowledge of supplementary skills for various activities of the built environment researchers. The project has identified and classified generic and transferable skills under the following six broad themes.

- paper / report writing skills;
- communication and presentation skills;
- personal development, professional competence, judgement and confidence;
- planning, organising, and time management;
- critical thinking and problem solving; and,
- team work and leadership.

There would be a guideline for each theme and an overall guideline for developing supplementary skills. The guides are written for everyone who is engaged in the Built Environment research, particularly postgraduate researchers reading for academic qualifications, e.g. MSc or PhD.

There is a wealth of information on each topic already available elsewhere, be it written or embedded in practice at various institutions. Due to space limitations, this guide does not provide comprehensive and exhaustive advice on each topic. Instead, this guide will provide some examples and practical tips that can help you to understand what developing each skill entails. It is hoped that this generic guide will stimulate you to think or rethink your chosen course of study as not just acquiring a qualification or passive learning experience of gaining some specialist knowledge on a research topic, but also as a process of developing you as a competent professional who can solve problems and contribute to the body of knowledge during the course of your study as well as for your future career.

This guide is thus intended to provide a foundation for which you can start with and as a common frame of reference to facilitate knowledge sharing among fellow students. For those of you who are interested in exploring further on particular topics, a reading list is provided at the end of each guide. Also remember that these supplementary skills need practice and you will learn through experience as well as reading some good materials. Like learning craft skills, we suggest that, as a starter, you emulate how other model people do and adapt their style and behaviour to suit your particular needs and style.

Developing communication and presentation skills

As with other skills, communication and

presentation skills are essential for researchers to present a clear logic of arguments to the academic domain experts and/or practical implications in a succinct and professional manner to a group of non-academics including busy industrialists and policy-makers. This guide concerns skills on communication and presentation (especially oral and visual) skills. For writing skills, there is a separate guide on paper and report writing, which is essentially complementary to this guide. Similar to writing, there are various ways to acquire and improve your communication and presentation skills.

First of all, this entails that you learn from doing and also from observing how other people are doing. Second, you need opportunities to practice these skills. This means you need to proactively seek opportunities to present your research and other related issues. Presenting your case in a non-threatening environment may boost your confidence. Third, abundant materials are already available and you may get practical advice on it. Even if you're an expert in communication and presentation skills, there might be always room for improvement. Last, but not least, you can form a small discussion group with peer researchers who can mutually learn from presenting and participating in subsequent discussion.

Successful presentations need thoughts and practice *a priori*. The relationship between the efforts for the delivery of presentation and those for its preparation can be described as a tip of iceberg shown above the water level and its hidden and much larger part below the surface.

Presentation
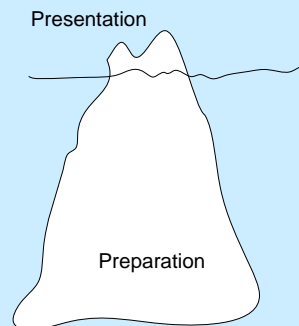
Preparation

Rehearsal of your presentation several times with yourself (and also possibly in front of your family and friends) would help you gain confidence. As the real life situation is highly variable, be prepared for the expected!

This guide is intended to give some (rather than exhaustive) practical advice and at the end some self-assessment questions through which you can identify gaps in your skills and devise an action plan to reach your desired level. For those of you who are interested in developing your communication and presentation skills, further reading list is also provided.

Some tips on preparing your conference presentation

Knowing your intended audiences
You have to know your audience. You may want to ask the following questions prior to preparing your presentation:

- Do you know what they need to know?
- Do you know what they know already?
- Do you know what they want to know?
- Do you know what their interests are?
- Do you know what their 'language' is?

If you do not know your audience in advance, you may have to make your presentation generic and, later on once you become more informed, attune the content of presentation to suit the audience's level of understanding, interest, and language. However, it would be better for you to ask the organiser about the audience.

Structure of your presentation
Your presentation structure will be largely dependent on the objective of the presentation, available resources, time requirements as well as the intended audience as discussed above. You may want to ask following questions:

- Do you know what your objective is?
- Do you know what equipment will be available?
- Do you know the time requirements for your presentation?

Is your objective to present and discuss key findings based on your case study in front of the industrial participants? Or, is this to report your empirical results in front of other peer researchers? Or, are you now requested to present your whole thesis in front of the external examiners? Although you may be equally nervous in each situation, your audience's anticipation might be considerably different.

Unless you are delivering your presentation at your own office or in your institution which you may know what facilities are there for you to use or, if not, who you should contact, you may need to check out whether you are expected to bring your own laptop and, even a projector and screen (it may not be a problem if you're presenting in a well organised conference, but always better to be safe than sorry)!

Even if the facilities are provided, you may be better off to check in advance whether your presentation materials are compatible with the systems running on the machine. Some conference organisers might ask you to send your presentation beforehand to load it to the machine (but never assume they check the compatibility between your file and their own system).

Lastly, it is important to stick with the time requirements for your presentation. It is often the case that certain time limits will be allocated for your presentation. Plan how much time you would assign for each part of your presentation. Say you have twenty minutes, it would be last thing you would like to do that you present your introduction for the first nineteen minutes and cram everything else in the last minute, do you? Allow five to ten minutes for discussion so that you do not just present your case, but also receive some constructive criticism or feedback. As there is a fair chance that previous presentations overrun, and you may have to shortcut your presentation, omitting some redundant introduction or arguments.

The objective of your presentation, availability and compatibility of technology, and time requirements may need to be taken into account when designing your presentation structure. There is no one best structure which is applicable for all situations; however, the structure may look similar to the following:

- Overview of the presentation
- Introduction
- Key areas
- Research methodology and scope
- Findings
- Summary
- Closing

Important thing is you have to design your

presentation to suit your own style and the setting in which your presentation will take place. If you have too many slides or too many graphics with far too many animation effects to present, the audience will be easily distracted. Adjust the amount of information to be conveyed considering the time and your audience, unless your objective is to prove that human beings are prone to information overload (there is already significant evidence of this, so please don't). As Einstein has once said, 'What can be counted can not be always counted upon.' You may have to compromise the quantity against the quality you wish to deliver.

Sometimes you may have to deliver a joint presentation and, in this case, you have to consider several other points to ensure your presentation is to be successful:
- Group presentations require close coordination among group members, thus allow more time for preparation of the material;
- If you are presenting the whole case on behalf of the group, make sure that you are also familiar with those parts that others have contributed;
- Discuss how you're going to split the roles during the presentation;
- Introduce the group members and their contributions briefly;
- Agree the timing for each has to finish (and perhaps develop and signal some symbolic signs to indicate when to finish); and,
- Rehearse several times together.

The first page

The first page of your Powerpoint™ presentation often includes title, author(s), affiliation, venue, etc. Apart from this basic information it conveys, the first page is quite important in that you don't want to give a bad impression of your presentation from the start. Although there is a saying that you cannot judge a book from its cover, some people may quickly judge the quality of your presentation based on the impression that the first page of your presentation leaves. Not many people would be impressed by your first page, but on the contrary it holds also true that once you've messed about in the first page it would be very difficult to revert people's judgement later on.

You may want to create and use your own style; however, if you're presenting to any group of people who are external to the university/research institutes/school, check out whether there are any templates styles recommended for use. For example, the university's templates styles are available on your network drive (eg, f: or h:) in the Corporate Templates folder. If you do not have access to your network drive they are available on the university intranet under Corporate Templates (<http://intranet.salford.ac.uk>). Some of the samples are shown as below:
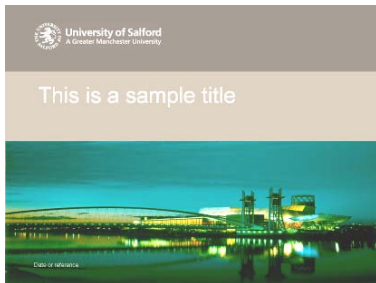
Message

It is very tempting to overcrowd your slides with many narratives using very small fonts thus you can 'read' the slides. Avoid the temptation, and use appropriately populated message. Adopt the KISS (Keep it Simple Stupid!) principle as far as possible.

Keep the font size as far as possible and choose good colour mix and combinations. You can also utilise paging and animation functions, but maintain consistency. Minimise boredom factor by using graphics sparingly and varying your voice to emphasise certain key points.

Using graphics, pictures and animations

As an old adage goes, 'a picture is worth a thousand words', using graphics, pictures and animations in an appropriate manner can convey a rich message. However, if misused or abused, they can easily offend or distract the audience. Thus, use graphics, pictures and animations only where appropriate.

Some suggestions for overcoming fear:
- Check facilities and gather information on the audience in advance;
- Use interesting quotes or humorous jokes in the beginning;
- Create an informal setting;
- Assume that your audience are on your side;
- Prepare some responses to tough questions or situations;
- Remember that you don't have to answer all the difficult questions on the spot;
- Don't be afraid to say you do not know when you really do not know; and,
- Rehearse several times.

Some tips on delivering conference presentations

Opening

In the opening you 'sell' your research by outlining your presentation, setting the background of your research and introducing key areas. It is much like the abstract of your written paper. In this part, you engage your audience, leave them wanting to know more. For this, you may want to discuss some controversial, unique or strange issues. You can also warm up the audience by introducing the context of research. For example, if the audience are from general fields rather than built environment specific, you may want to introduce the significance of built environment in terms of its contribution to GDP, employment, and national infrastructure. You can also identify the key areas of your research.

Capturing your audience

Although your research may represent a groundbreaking piece of research, do not assume that your audience will automatically show patience and reverence while you're presenting your own case. Your research may be important to you, but should have significance to others. There should be something in it for them! Hence, what is your selling point? How do you sell it? If

you sound dull, your product might be perceived as dull as your voice. You may want to think about how you can keep your audience from being distracted. At least, the following may be considered:

- Your voice
- Body language and eye contacts
- Key points

First, you may need to vary your voice and avoid monotonous speech by reading your material. You can vary your volume, pace, and emphasis during your speech. Not everything needs to be emphasised, and you may have to make sure that the logic of arguments flow naturally. Use your own words and if necessary some anecdotes, analogies, and examples could help bring the material to life.

Second, use your body language fluently. You don't have to be a football coach while you're presenting your research findings! Free your arms and hands as your hands kept in a pocket or finger-biting could be interpreted in certain culture as your incompetence or snobbishness. Take control of your gesture/posture and facial expressions and use them to your advantage. Among others, keeping constant eye contact with the audience is quite important so that you keep inviting them to your presentation. Show that you're communicating with the whole audience rather than leaving an impression that you're talking to the back window or door of the room (although this may be a perfectly appropriate practice if you're delivering a presentation to Idaho native Americans). Relatedly, a particular individual may ask you a question, but you need to attempt to answer everyone.

Third, develop your own style to sell your key points. For example, you can project your voice (but don't shout please), pause, or use repetition. You may pose (or invite) a question to the audience after each key area and engage them (however, if you have to stick to the time limit, it may be prudent to delay questions until the end).

Conclusion and closing

Highlight key points only and keep them simple. Invite the audience to refer to the proceedings for further information. Usually the chair will invite the audience to ask questions at the end of your presentation, so be prepared to answer the

questions as far as possible and, if you don't know any particular aspects, acknowledge that you don't know well, and ask the audience, of whom may be able to help.

Presenting your research in conferences is in itself quite important because it can help you:
- Receive feedback from informed audience;
- Increase confidence on what you're researching;
- Have some medium-term goals and deadlines to motivate you;
- Network with other researchers who may be in a similar field and, thus, can help you access other experts or industry contacts;
- Raise your research profile; and,
- Get exposed to future employers.

To plan for conference presentation, seek advice from your supervisor and peers early on and target good relevant conferences.

Summary

This guide has discussed developing your communication and presentation skills and provided some practical tips on preparing and delivering conference presentations. Throughout the guide it is emphasised that you have to understand who your audiences are and what requirements you are expected to follow. Unlike journal papers, although more rigorous standards are often imposed, conference presentations require different skills as you have to respond to your audience instantly and you have to condense your research so that it can be presentable within a limited time frame.

Examples of good practice are abundant, but you can learn a lot from talking to your supervisor and colleagues. You can also practise your presentation skills with your friends, family, or relatives. There are some books which you can consult including the ones in the further reading list, but you may want to develop your presentation skills through lived experience, e.g. presentations in workshops, a small discussion group, or in front of your colleagues. Talk to your colleagues and help each other by reciprocating feedback.

To help you identify which areas you may need to improve, a self-evaluation matrix is provided at the end of this guide. You may want to reflect upon your current level of competency and identify the gaps between the current status and the desired status for this important skill. Although it is designed to help you increase your awareness through self-reflection, you may also want to discuss your concerns with your supervisor and colleagues. Problems are easy to rectify when they are identified at an early stage and shared with others, who may gladly be your helping hands.

> Practice makes perfect. Some advice from fellow BuHu postgraduates on developing your presentation skills include the following:
> - 'Do some dry runs in front of peers and act upon observations';
> - 'Do presentations as much as possible within safe environments to boost the confidence';
> - 'As a researcher, I think this aspect is very important. Only way of improving is by practice. Need to take whatever the opportunity you get to communicate with others may be orally or by any other means'
>
> Well, why not consider voluntary presentations for your research or other relevant areas, or even telling your lived experience in BuHu postgraduate workshops? For presenting your research or any other related topics, please contact Dr Dilanthi Amaratunga or Dr Richard Haigh.

Further reading list

General books and guidelines on presentation skills abound. You may speak to other researchers and supervisors to recommend some good books appropriate to your level. The following further reading list provides some general books on presentation skills, which you can refer to:

Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. and Tight, M. (1996) *How to Research*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G. and Williams, J. M. (2003) *The Craft of Research,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Education Development Unit (Undated) Study Skills Pack: Presentation Skills, The University of Salford, Salford. (available at http://www.edu.salford.ac.uk/studyskills/sspacks/)

Potter, S. (Ed.) (2002) *Doing Postgraduate Research*, Sage Publications, London.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research,* Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Acknowledgements

Appendix:
Self-assessment for Communication and Presentation Skills

Complete this Skills Audit now and compare progress each year during your PhD. Through this exercise, you would have opportunities to assess your awareness of both strengths and weaknesses. This will form the basis of your supplementary skills profile. Having completed this assessment of your supplementary skills, you may want to set targets for yourself and develop strategy to improve any aspect of the particular supplementary skills. You may want to identify sources of good practice or model which you would like to emulate or learn through experience. Some of the aspects might be discussed during workshop or training sessions in your school, research institute or university, so check with the pertinent websites or student handbook. You may also discuss with your supervisor(s), who can provide you with some help on whether there are opportunities for you to practice your skills.

Rate your ability according to the scale provided as below. As you go through each category, it is useful to think about how you can develop your skills on a short-term as well as long-term basis.

Rating

4 — Very well
I feel confident in my ability to use this skill.

3 — Satisfactory
I am able to use this skill well, but my ability could be further improved.

2 — Needs attention
My ability to use this skill needs to improve.

1 — Needs considerable attention
I struggle with this skill and need to put in considerable efforts to develop this skill.

Rate your ability against each statement below:	Rating	Target	Improvement Strategy
I am able to give oral/visual presentations in a setting involving industry audience			
I am able to give oral/visual presentations of my research in my university			
I can give oral/visual presentations of my research at academic/industry conferences			
I can make contributions (questions/ suggestions) that relate to the previous material			
I can participate actively in seminars including giving constructive criticism			
I can effectively use audio-visual materials to support presentations (e.g. Powerpoint, OHT, and/or other audio-visualisation programmes)			
I can give oral presentations to a non-expert audience			
I am able to manage the time given for my presentation			
I am able to use additional functions of Powerpoint software (e.g. animation effects and linking to other files)			
I can introduce myself as well as others in a workshop setting			
I am able to meet a sudden request to shorten or lengthen my presentation			
I listen to other speakers			

Consider your responses above and rate your overall ability for communication and presentation skills	Rating	Target	Improvement Strategy
Communication and presentations skills			

Any problems?

Things I need to improve

Action plan for the next review (set your own review frequency such as quarterly or yearly)