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Rhetorical features of academic presentations

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Abstract: The academic presentation is a relatively new format which enlarges its spheres of application, being implemented in different types of higher learning. Presentations are adopted as a method of lecturing and evaluating students' progress during the course of studies and final exams. Presentations of academic essays, reports and master theses can also be addressed to colleagues and evaluators. Consequently, these types of academic presentations expand their sphere of application (and it is required to) into perfecting (improve) students' presentation skills. Conferences, seminars and discussions are other fields where academic presentations are an effective way of introducing and presenting scientific research results. A presentation combines verbal, non-verbal, sound and visual elements; scenario, structure and slides. An actual presenting includes not only speaking and pronouncing, but also an effective behaviour, which implies the use of technical skills and non-verbal means of communication in order to influence the academic audience. Rhetorical features are manifested on a verbal level whenever the presenter combines rhetorical figures and arguments; additionally during a modern academic presentation s/he includes visual metaphors and argumentation. The presenter prefers photos, video clips, tables, diagrams and figures which are used alongside verbal means. One relatively un-investigated and poorly developed area is the use of academic presentations during distance education and particularly the methodology of these kinds of presentations. Other aspects include how to establish database incorporating academic presentations and how to improve the quality of education in computer mediated communication. In conclusion, it is possible to say that academic presentations integrate common and basic elements but every presenter should have the rhetorical skills to speak relevantly in front of different kinds of audiences.

Key words: academic presentation, rhetoric, education, evaluation, online social media and social networks.

Introduction

The presentation is a relatively new format which encompasses rhetoric as an indivisible element of the complete process of preparation and demonstration. We agree with the following basic statement about rhetoric generalized in the definition given in Chapter 2 of Aristotle's Rhetoric which formulates rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" [1]. Oratory is thousands of years old practice but technology opens different opportunities for the growing diversity of rhetorical applications in the new spheres and particularly in the academic communication. The academic presentations follow rhetorical traditions but at the same time they have been adapted to the process of

university education which requires interdisciplinary preparation including different types of knowledge and skills (rhetoric, pedagogy, IT, technical, semiotic, etc.).

Academic presentation – a volume of the notion

The notion *presentation* possesses positive connotation. The etymology of the term ‘presentation’ is Latin (*presentatio*). The contemporary sense is ‘presenting something in different spheres: arts, business, education, trainings, public communication, social activities, medicine’ etc.

There are disparate positions regarding the nature of presentation. The first one accepts presentation as speaking in front of an audience where it is a variant of speech. The second group of specialists thinks that academic presentation is a variant of academic lecture. We disagree with this position because lecture is a traditional academic genre and it includes illustrations which are in a subordination compared to the verbal elements. Most lecturers use visualisation during the teaching process but photos, pictures, tables, maps, schedules, etc. are visual support and they amplify the clarification of scientific information.

The third position expresses too narrow comprehension of the notion and there is an interchange of the scope and the element. This group accepts that presentations are a final multimedia product (prepared using) of Power Point or other software program application (Movie Maker or Sony Vegas, including animations and Flash effects, combining oral speaking, video clips, different visual elements etc.). Sometimes is not possible to separate the different elements and if the internet user watches the presentation on YouTube, ted.com or Slide Share, he or she prefers to accept the information more pragmatically and avoids genre analysis. Definitely scientists, lecturers and researchers prefer the academic approach but ordinary users have preferences for easier access and they appreciate the practical results of the presentations.

From my point of view as a whole the presentation combines in indivisible final variant verbal, visual and technological elements. It includes not only speaking and pronouncing, relevant use of paralinguistic and non-verbal elements simultaneously with verbal means. The technological aspects of presentations comprise the skills of speaking in front of a microphone and camera and the use of multimedia, as well as knowledge and skills to prepare multimedia products and to apply them in the process of presenting.

Rhetorical canons and academic presentations

The rhetorical heritage includes the following basic concept: the orator is one of the main figures during the delivery of the speech and he or she is the sender of messages. There are *two sources* during presenting: *the presenter* and *the multimedia product projected on the video wall, screen or TV set*. It requires precise preparation and achieving synchrony of the two sources in the final phase of enactment. The presenter speaks but at the same time he or she conducts the whole process of presenting.

In accordance with the other main ancient rhetorical maxim every orator leans on three columns: ability or talent (*natura, ingenium*), theory (*doctrina, ars*) and practice (*exercitatio, imitatio*). For thousands of years these rules have been valid particularly in connection to presentations. T. M. Elizavetina accepts that the technological skills to prepare multimedia product and to apply it during the presentation are very important too [2].

The classical rhetoric creates five focal points: *inventio* (finding an argument), *dispositio* (ordering the argument), *elocutio* (style, rhetorical figures and tropes), *memoria* and *pronunciatio* or *actio* (delivery). Ivanka Mavrodieva considers that it is necessarily to adapt and actualize some of the basic terms of the rhetorical heritage in the process of academic presenting [3]. On account of this we will make an attempt to explain shortly their specific application in the academic presentations.

We agree that *inventio* is the first stage in the preparation of presentations and that it requires discovering information and arguments. Every presenter searches, selects and arranges the information obtained from scientific sources but simultaneously they need to find or prepare photos, video clips, schedules, tables, etc. As a final result verbal and visual elements are combined. Sometimes the preparation of the multimedia product is a result of a team work of students who have competences in different spheres: design, photography, movies, IT, semiotics, languages, etc. The presenter can be a member of this team but he or she may receive the final variant and deliver the presentation in front of an audience. Consequently, the presenter has more difficult tasks in comparison with the classic orator who pronounces the speech.

Dispositio is the next step which requires the integration of verbal and visual elements on the slides and the choice and usage of the complete final multimedia product.

At the same time the presenter needs to prepare the additional text notes to every slide because the synchrony between the speaker's words and the projected information on the

screen, video or TV set should be perfect in quality, complete in quantity and permanent as a flow.

Consequently we can say that these are two parallel products (multimedia presentation and verbal text) which are to be used simultaneously by the presenter during the presentation.

Elocutio is the most complex phase during the process of preparation of academic presentations. Rhetorical figures have application on the verbal and visual levels. Visual metaphors, gradations, anaphors, ellipses, etc. have manifestations in completely different areas in comparison with the classical rhetorical canons. Most presenters prefer to use visual elements taking into consideration that they should attract the attention of the students.

Memoria has a specific application in the academic presentations. The presenter does not learn by heart the whole text because presentations are not only verbal texts and oral articulation. It is very important to know the allocation and distribution of the information on the slides and to prepare all additional information which should be synchronized with the verbal and visual elements.

Pronunciatio is completely different in comparison with both the speech and the lecture. The presenter delivers the text prepared in advance and the synchrony between the verbal information and information projected on the screen should be perfect. Reading from the screen is not a relevant behaviour for the presenter because members of the academic audience can themselves read the text (bullets) from the screen or video wall while (at the same time) listening to the presenter. It is not accepted as adequate and effective for the presenter to read from the screen for in such a way they repeat the same information shown on the slides.

From a rhetorical point of view each presentation is comprised of three parts: *introduction*, *body*, and *conclusion*. There are different terms used by specialists: introduction, main message and conclusion or introduction, bridges, core part. John Adair accepts that the process of presenting could be separated in two phases: the first one includes beginning, middle, end and the second one – questions, discussion and conclusion [4]. Malcolm Kushner introduces the notion ‘presentation’ and the information is explained more popularly in view in the fact that this is “Dummies” [5]. T. M. Elizavetina in her book “Computer Presentations. From the rhetoric to the slide-show” explains the same classic structure: introduction, body, and conclusion. She recommends a short self-presentation and introduction of the main topics at the beginning of the presentation. Upon completion s/he should answer questions asked by

the members of the audience and express gratitude to the participants in the forum and the event [6].

Bulgarian scientific studies of public presentation for academic purposes are represented in some publications concerning the place of presentations both in education and in business communication. Olya Harizanova lists the conditions for successful presentations and she assumes that the presentation plays a role in the process of career development in business organisations [7]. The differences between academic and business presentations are researched by Ivanka Mavrodieva and the results are analyzed in the article “Rhetorical and PR features of Presenting in Education and Business” [8]. Stefania Temelkova compares Public Speaking and Presenting in her article an same name [9]. Ivo Piperkov (in four successive articles) focuses on two topics: the first one includes the specific features of presentations and multimedia interaction; the second one explains the good practices of students’ education and multimedia educational products in Public Relations [10].

We differentiate between two phases in presentations: *monologue* and *dialogue*. The monologue includes the following parts: introduction, body and conclusion. The introduction is usually developed on two or three slides (when the presenter informs) covering (the audience about) the main topics and acting as a self-presenting device. The conclusion, usually on two slides, entails a summary or generalizations (and two slides are sufficient). It is very important for academic audiences to receive information that is systematically structured. Students prefer to focus on the most important terms or conclusions and on account of this, the introduction and the conclusion play an essential role. The visual element should be part of the beginning because the academic presenter tries to grab the attention of the audience. The conclusion is shorter and the same time powerful because the final should be well-defined. The presenter has the opportunities to be more creative and to organize the main topics more flexibly as well as to combine visual and verbal elements, video and audio, music and animation effects. The dialogue could be part of the presentation if some members of the audience ask questions and if the presenter gives them the answers. This phase requires dynamic communication as short and at the same time correct, complete and ethic answers are given immediately by the presenter.

Applications of academic presentations

Independently what kind of the presentation they make, every presenter has a place in the educational institution following the rules, roles and tasks. Academic presentations have a pragmatic purpose and they are applied in different situations during the course of university education, for example: Academic Presenting in English in the Open University Netherlands (<http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/2/00/385.html>), Academic presenting Moodle (http://www.ufz.de/data/2010MS0203_Baker_Template11827.pdf), Academic Presenting (http://www.rwth-aachen.de/global/show_document.asp?), Oral Presentations for Tutorials & Seminars (<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/tutsem.html>).

The presentations have a definite place and it is possible to organize them following certain steps: choice of topic, instruction connected with the place of the academic presentation in the educational process, preparation, implementation, and analysis of the effects and results.

During the process of teaching and evaluation it is possible for students to be active participants and to (present) give presentations prepared in advance in front of their lecturer and colleagues. The presentations could be part of a seminar or evaluation tools; they could be part of the final examination or incentive for academic achievement. From rhetorical point of view the presenter could show personal research or observation or a paper and project which is the result of team work. He or she could organise self-presentation if there is concurrence of the creator and author of multimedia product and the presenter.

Another rhetorical feature of academic presentation is that the student rarely uses a white board or a flip chart (simultaneously) together with a multimedia project. Most of them prefer to follow a preliminary-set scenario and the texts combine verbal, non-verbal and visual elements. The students have to convince the audience when defending their master theses. Such situations require the use of academic presentations as a secondary product of a written academic text of the ‘dissertation’ or ‘PhD thesis’ genre.

Scientific conferences also require presentation of scientific reports and papers. In such cases the presentations are the secondary product of the academic genre (paper or report) which is written and edited.

New applications of scientific presentations

In this part of the article the focus is on the three applications of scientific presentations, precisely Slide Share (<http://www.slideshare.net/>), TED – Ideas Worth Spreading

(<http://www.ted.com/>) and the site of “College of Public Speaking” (<http://www.videojug.com>). The conclusion that the applications of the presentations are enlarged is based on the following facts: the Internet, the Web 2.0 and in particular the social networks provide new opportunities for presenters to establish and maintain easily the publicity of their presentations. The presenters become more popular. At the same time they are aware of the loads of responsibilities and the basic rules they have to follow in covering the requirements as creators of content, and what is more, they communicate with the visitors or the internet users as scientist, researchers, and experts and sometimes as key opinion leaders. The presenters who disseminate their presentations (audio, video, PowerPoint etc.) in the virtual space should combine the perfect or very good presentations skills with impressive manner of speaking and effective use of non-verbal elements. They should have abilities to conduct a dialogue and give correct and complete answers. The ted.com includes more opportunities and everybody can find different types of presentations and (accept) learn new facts, positions, opinions explained by experts, key opinion leaders, celebrities, etc. Presenters from different scientific fields explain new theories, introduce notions and terms. Everyone can watch again and again the (full) whole presentations or part of a preferred presentation and he or she can find some errors. At the same time, every user of the Internet can share their presentation (giving a meaning of) utilizing the possibilities of the social networks and Web 2.0. Members of the virtual audiences can write comments and can express their opinion as members of virtual forums, some of them being active or permanent participants in forums, granting that all these provide personal evaluation.

Some sites evaluate the presentations and the presenters alike and it is appropriate to appraise this new rhetorical format in the virtual space. For example the site named “Learn out Loud” (http://www.learnoutloud.com/content/blog/archives/2011/11/100_best_ted_talks.html) posted some information on November 10th, 2011 about the 100 best TED. From my point of view this is virtual measuring of the quality of the presentations selected by TED (TED started in 1984 “as a conference bringing together people from three worlds: Technology, Entertainment, Design ” as it can be seen in the site: <http://www.learnoutloud.com>. TED has a blog and it is appropriate to share the presentations employing the opportunities of the online social media and social networks (<http://blog.ted.com/2011/09/29/teaching-science-by-bad-example-qa-with-ben-goldacre/>).

Presentations are often used in direct academic communication but e-learning is developing dynamically, for example the site “E-Learn” and in particular the detailed information regarding the presentation types (full papers, brief papers, panels, roundtable, symposia etc.), social networks such as Facebook and Twitter; blogs as used too as a part of the e-learning – (<http://aace.org/conf/elearn/categories.htm>).

Academic presentations and teaching

Having in mind the changes in the audience approach under the influence of the new technologies, media and internet, the lecturers now have to include in the educational process new ways of presenting the information that have proved to be effective. Analysing the effectiveness of the teaching methods also leads to efficient uses of the new opportunities for university teaching.

The presentation skills are now considered to be an integral part of the teachers’ communication abilities. That is why the question of the place of the academic presentation becomes very important, especially when it comes to the level of teacher proficiency, motivation for self-improvement and carrier growth, availability of the necessary technical and technological base – computer rooms and presentation equipment, changes in the approach to the different social groups or the need to constantly keep the universities’ public image as educational and socializing institutions.

It is possible to use presentation when teaching a certain topic. The teacher is the active leader in this process and his/her presentation of the educational content is dominating. During the presentation the lecturer can use interactive methods making it possible for the students to become part of the process and stimulating their creativity and critical thinking. Apart from that, other moments of self-preparation, control and self-control can be included in the teaching. At the end of the presentation there could be a test given by the teacher, which could be used for the evaluation of the students. Wherever computer rooms can be used, the teacher can conduct a presentation as an individual approach.

Realizing the advantages of the presentations as well as the specific moments in their preparation, the lecturers feel motivated to use them although they understand that they will need time for this. Presentations need active inclusion of available resources like time, experience, internet and other sources of information, and labour. Therefore, the appropriate evaluation of the lecturer’s endeavours should encounter these factors. It is very important to

define that the teaching effectiveness and the quality of the mediated knowledge means adequate evaluation and stimulation of the teachers that use effective methods of teaching like the presentation.

The use of academic presentations in distance learning is a relatively un-investigated sphere. At the same time it is very important to create the methodology of presentations which can be used during the e-learning. University faculty and university management have started lately a discussion on how to establish database including academic presentations and how to increase the quality of education under the conditions of computer mediated communication. From a scientific point of view, the matter of the rhetorical skills of the presenter is insufficiently analysed.

Academic presentations and students' evaluation

Students, especially those that look for distinctive appearance, would feel motivated to make presentations which will be used for evaluation of their knowledge. Therefore, the students' presentations can be used for stimulation of their abilities to create, research and analyze. However, it is very important to define that the lecturer is the person to supervise how a presentation is created and conducted. S/He is the one to choose the theme, to define the sources of information and the way it should be selected, as well as the order for its presentation. The teacher leads the preparation process, consults the students and divides the tasks in case of a team presentation. S/He should be very well acquainted with the individual abilities of the team or group members. Some students are attracted to gathering information, others are experienced in slide preparation and structuring, still others prefer working out the visual and musical effects, and finally some students are very good at conducting the presentation in front of the audience. The lecturer is the one to decide whether to give tasks for creation of individual presentations to the students and to use them as a way of achieving knowledge. Therefore, the lecturer should combine teaching and presentational experience, methodical knowledge, and organizational approach, based on complete awareness of the individual abilities and motivation of the learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is possible to say that academic presentations include common and basic elements but every presenter is to master up the rhetorical skills of speaking relevantly in

front of different kinds of academic audiences. The analysis of the applications of academic presentations shows that options for the use of the presentation in the university education are wider than ever. This is a sufficient reason to say that academic presentations are part of the educational process, the educational management and the formation of the communication skills of the lecturers and students alike. The analysis of their incorporation in the educational process shows they can be helpful for creating a database with student and lecturer presentations by authorized and well prepared institutions and teams. This information should be well structured as the database may become the core of a growing corpus of presentations. The social networks create new opportunities to share presentations; the access to the scientific presentation is easier but at the same time the virtual audience can write and express their opinion in virtual forums, therefore, the presenters should be powerful. Strong support and constant updating of the information on web-sites and catalogues, as well as in the social networks and social media, for example blogs, is required. The question about the author's rights, the evaluation of the students' and lecturers' labour remains important and is still active on the agenda.

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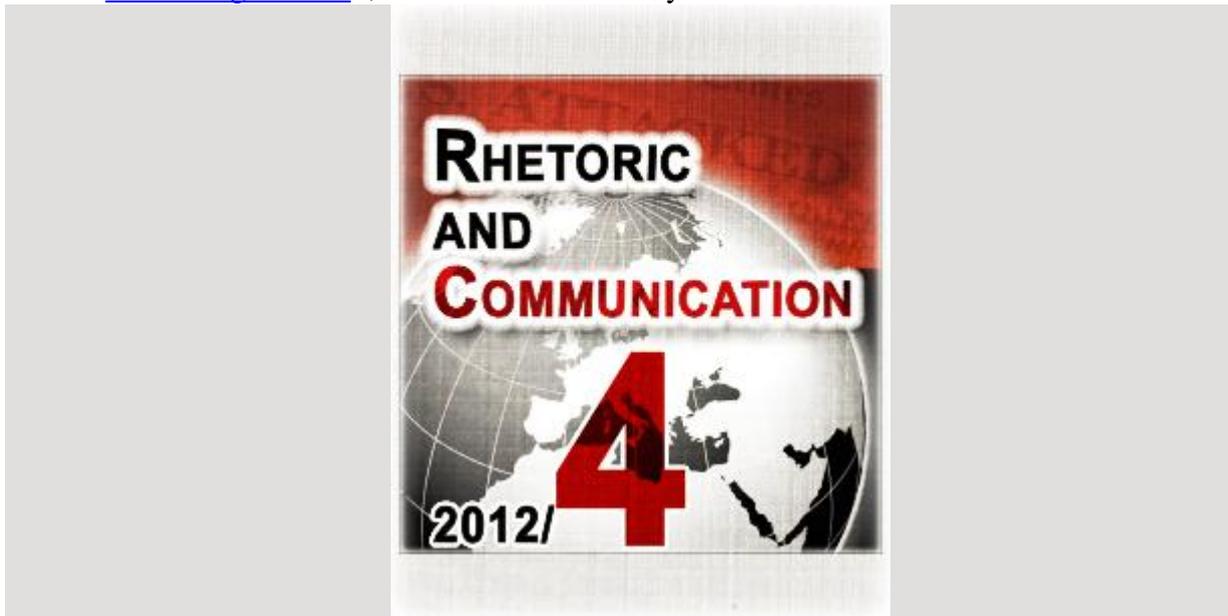
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