The role of the audience + how to be a good audience member

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What Makes an Effective Audience for RCM 401?

Bitzer states that a rhetorical audience must be ”mediators of change”. Along with this, RCM 401 audiences must have other qualities so as to allow and encourage their fellow peers to learn.

These qualities include:

- Ability to critically listen, while being able to interpret the message from more angles than just yours.
- Willingness to become outspoken during both the question and feedback periods.
- Keep mind open to all topics so as to see the internal structure of the message i.e. Exigence, action, audience relations.
- Ability to create notes on all aspects of the speech while still listening and watching for delivery quirks that can be worked out.

Audience Influence on the Speaker

Although audiences are not vocally communicating with the speaker, all rhetorical speaking requires active participation by the audience. Body language of the audience can have a large impact on how the speaker delivers their message. Body language can show a speaker how you are feeling about their message, delivery, and audience consideration. Although it is important that the speaker sees these emotions and cues, but remember in excess they can become distracting.

The article ”Listening: The 'Lost' Communication Skill” outlines sets of behaviours to avoid and sets of behaviours to engages in. These are listed below.

Avoid:

1. Stare
2. Yawn
3. Looking away
4. Nervous habits, fidgeting
5. Shaking head negatively
6. Moving away from speaker
7. Negative facial expression, such as frowning or pouting
8. Crossed arms

Engage In:

1. Direct eye contact
2. Smiling
3. Nodding
4. Eyes wide open
5. Forward lean
6. Positive facial expression

Not only can your body language change the way the speech is delivered but can affect how all your feedback is received. Mark Bowden speaks in his Ted Talk about how important body language is in establishing a relationship and therefore the effective reception of a message.

Article: Listening: The "Lost" Communication Skill

TED: The Importance of Being In Authentic

The speaker must adjust to the constraints of the audience. As a member of this audience you may contribute to these constraints, it is important that audience members understand that speakers will be reading and responding to their body language. Audience members must have a level of awareness surrounding their own body language to ensure that they are not unintentionally sabotaging the speech. The links below outlines what a speaker is watching for while delivering their message, consequently audience members should be aware of these body language areas. Proper monitoring and adjustment of behaviours in key areas can exude a positive environment for the speaker, and build your audience ethos by showing good will.

Article: Body Language Interpreted By The Speaker

The article below outlines a strategy used by presenter to read their audience. This can now be used by us audience members to determine proper body language while participating in active listening.
Reading Your Audience’s Body Language

by Patti Wood

Wouldn’t it be great if you could get inside the minds of your audience and know what they are thinking about you and your presentation? Actually, you can – by reading their body language. Once you know what they’re thinking, you can respond and have a successful presentation. Learning a few simple body language signals can you help you discover the answers to the following questions:

1. Do they understand?
   When audience members are confused, they will move in a random way, picking things up and putting them down. They will shift in their seats or shuffle their feet. Their brows may furrow and they may rub their eyes or face typically downward as if they could clear their head of the confusion, or they may touch their temple or forehead symbolically pushing the “on” button for their brain. Their eyes may blink open and shut as if they hoped they could see more clearly. Also, look for cues that look asymmetrical, symbolically saying, “I am a little off the mark.” They may tilt their head to the side, lean to one side, shut one eye and squint, or show one facial expression on one side of the face and another on the other side. If someone wants to ask a clarifying question but isn’t sure it’s safe, she may cover her mouth with her hand.

2. Are they bored?
   Look for signals that show they have shut down or turned off. An audience member may turn away from you or slump in their chair. Sometimes people will lean backwards and lazily rest their arms around the back of the chair, or in mock naptime posture, they may slump forward in their chair, leaning or lying across the table. They may also put their head to the side or down; break eye contact; fix their eyes into space, or close their eyes for brief or even long periods. They may have a vacant look on their face because they aren’t tuned in.

3. Are they frustrated, impatient or ready to go?
   If they have gone from boredom to irritation, there may be big hints that they want to move on to another point or they are ready to leave the room, such as reading a newspaper or checking their watches or their PDAs. If they are extroverted types such as sales people, they may symbolically run from the room by crossing their feet and moving the dangling foot quickly up and down, or tapping the foot.

4. Are they not buying in? Do they feel attacked?
   Sometimes your message is controversial or difficult for an audience to take. If your audience is defensive, they will symbolically protect themselves by shutting down, getting away, or attacking. They shut down by crossing the arms, legs, or ankles, or shutting the mouth into a thin line. They may grimace and cover their mouths with their hands. They will “run” away by looking away, turning the heart and upper torso away, or pointing the legs or feet toward the exit and exhaling quickly and loudly. They will symbolically attack by clenching the teeth, jaws, lips or hands. They may square off the body to you in a confrontational way, putting their hands on their hips.

5. Are they resentful? Do they not like you or dislike your viewpoint or content?
   If an audience feels injured or mistreated by you, your message, or the whole darn meeting, you may see them do the following: cross their arms; stiffen their back or limbs; grimace; look or turn away, or show the signs of anger mentioned above.

6. Do they doubt you or your claims? Do they think you’re lying?
   When someone is suspicious, he will look at you in a judging way. A suspicious person is trying to form an opinion. Her body shows her discomfort. Look for furrowed brows; squinting eyes; peering down; tilting the head; or tightening the lips, as if to stop a disparaging comment. If the audience does not believe you, you’ll see grimacing and exhaling, clenching teeth, head shaking, or a tight smile masking their displeasure.

7. Do they get it?
   When audience members are excited and happy, they fill up with those good feelings. Look for a sudden shift usually upwards and a big inhalation, shifting the weight, usually forward or bouncing in the seat, or a rocking motion.

8. Are they interested and excited?
   The audience signals their interest by smiling, tilting the head (to hear better), furrowing the brow in concentration, but not with a pained look, and by leaning forward and blinking (with excitement so as not to miss anything). They are “up” for what you are saying, so their overall posture will be up and attentive as well.

The next time you speak, try these tips and see if you can “read” your audience. By understanding their body language, you can tweak your presentation and make it even more of a success!

Patti Wood is the author of “Success Signals: Body Language in Business” and the forthcoming “People Savvy.” She can be contacted at 404.371.5228, or visit www.pattwood.net.
Critically Listening

Listening critically as defined by Trudy Mercadal-Sabbagh and Michael Purdy “is used to evaluate a message before accepting or rejecting it”. Effective listening can sometimes be difficult and barriers can be formed from many places including the environment and the message itself.

Common barriers formed by the audience:

- Physiological (within ourselves, ex: personal opinions)
- Within the communication (ex: language barrier)
- Within the environment (distractions, ex: noise)
- Learned from social or cultural associations and influences (ex: reactions to stereotypical labels, ethnocentric rituals)

Awareness of the above barriers and effort by the audience to alleviate them allows for proper critical listening.

What to Look for in the Speech

“Listening: The 'Lost' Communication Skill” states that an audience must decide what to listen for; Appreciation, Information, Understanding and or critical evaluation of information, Evidence and arguments, mode of presentation, situation. As current RCM 401 students we have developed to become more selective and aware of things taken place during a presentation. When participating as an audience member we must look for delivery styles, but also be aware of the argument. Looking beyond the delivery to the structure and balance within a speech is key to understanding what factors make a message effectively delivered. In RCM 401 speeches, we need to be especially concerned with understanding and critical evaluation of information as well as evidence arguments, and mode of presentation.

Mode of Presentation- Concerned with the delivery of the message. Delivery is more than just vocal presentation, but is also concerned with actions of the body. Watch for hand gestures, facial expression, body movements, vocal volume, speech tags, teeth smacking, and other body language that occur.

Evidence and Arguments- The actual information supplied in the message. This includes the topic and the justification supplied by the speaker. Things to watch out for are fluency, logic, captivation, and absorption of arguments. Evidence must come from multiple sources and balanced between the modes of appeal.

Understanding and Critical Evaluation- Critical evaluation should be assessed throughout the speech, and finalized at the end of the presentation when you can consider all components. Placement of presentation elements is a key area to focus on when finalizing your evaluation, order can be the difference between an element being effective or ineffective.

Note Taking

Note taking is a large part of RCM 401 not only because it allows you to give feedback on whether or not a speaker is improving but also because you will need to structure an analysis on how a speaker progressed throughout the course. For each individual speech taking effective notes allows you to organize your thoughts and remember all parts of the speech. Notes should be concise and straight to the point ensuring that your time is devoted in a balanced manner between notes and the speaker. Notes should cover the topic, action, argument points, delivery, strengths, weaknesses, and the modes of appeal used.

Our source supplies multiple strategies for note taking, emphasizing ways to effectively use your piece of paper.

Article and Video: Note taking strategies

If you have a note taking strategy that you have already developed to work for you it is best to stay with that, just ensure you cover the areas outlined above.

Constructive Feedback and its Delivery

Constructive feedback is a major part of the RCM 401 class. Without feedback speakers will not know where they have excelled or lacked. This process is key to the development of you and your classmates so it is important that the feedback is taken positively and not ignored due to mistakes in the way it is delivered. Feedback can be one of the most challenging things we must do in this course.

The following article explains how to balance your feedback to ensure it is constructive rather than overly critical or praising.

Constructive Feedback 'For Dummies'

This video give 5 tips for the effective delivery of constructive feedback.

Video: How to give constructive feedback