Continuous Audience Adaptation

Brief: An effective public speaker continuously adapts his or her message to the particular audience while preparing and presenting his or her speech.

Learning Objective: Adapt a speech's message to the audience while preparing and presenting a speech.

Key Terms:
- Audience response system (ARS): A digital technology used to determine the audience's current understanding or opinions.

Adapt the Message to the Audience During Preparation

The demographic information you gather can help you imagine how your audience will respond to different aspects of your message. While structuring your message, keep the composite picture of all of that information—your imagined, theoretical audience—in mind and anticipate how they will respond to the speech by considering the following:

- What experiences do you share with the audience? In what ways are you similar? Can you apply this knowledge to identify with them and find common ground?

- Analogies are figures of speech that involve comparing two concepts that aren't entirely alike, but share a common property. You can use analogies to compare a concept that is unknown to your audience with a concept that is more familiar to them. What analogies—or examples—can you use that the audience will likely find relatable?

- Beware of jargon, or specialized language. You may be familiar with words from a specific area of expertise, but it's likely that some audience members may be unfamiliar with your choice of words if they don't share that expertise.

- If you come from a different language cultural background than the audience or speak in a different dialect, be careful to select phrases and words that your audience will be the most apt to understand.

- In some cases, you may have to set aside your own attitudes, values, and beliefs in order to temporarily adopt the viewpoint of your audience. Consider that the sources your audience may accept might be different from the authorities that you choose to cite to support your arguments or beliefs.

Adapt the Message to the Audience While Delivering the Speech

Adapting your message to your audience doesn't end with the speech preparation. For your speech to be successful, continuously adapt your speech to the audience as you speak.

When you're face-to-face with your audience, observe non-verbal reactions, such as looks of confusion or expressions of agreement or disagreement, and adjust the message accordingly.

Another way to monitor your audience's comprehension of your message is to ask your audience a question. If your audience looks confused, you can ask them to reply to a clarifying question with a show of hands. Based on their response, you can adapt accordingly by restating your point in a new way.

Using Technology

With a larger face-to-face audience, a speaker may want to use an audience response system (ARS), also known as clicker technology, to determine what the audience understands or what their current opinions are. ARS systems work with the audience's WI-FI enabled notebooks, laptops, or other hand-held devices. If the speaker's computer is also Wi-Fi-enabled, then he or she can display the responses on a screen while speaking and adapt the message accordingly. ARS systems can be used for large audiences anywhere in a classroom, lecture hall, or when speaking by teleconference.

Cell phones using SMS response systems are another way for the speaker to collect information and adapt during the speech. Cell phone-enabled response systems, such as SMS Response Systems, are able to take text inputs from the audience and receive multiple responses to questions per SMS.

For facilities that do not have the equipment to analyze the SMS data during the speech, the audience can send tweets to the speaker, using a hashtag that is unique to the occasion or presentation. The tweets can be displayed as part of a back channel from remote audiences or members of large audiences using their smartphones, and the speaker can respond to the tweets or adapt his or her message in real time.

From Concept to Action

The next time that you're listening to someone who's talking to you for an extended period of time—such as during a face-to-face class lecture or when you're receiving instructions at

work—notice how that person adapts to their audience's nonverbal feedback. The speaker's adaptations might be obvious, such as speaking louder if they there are competing sounds in the environment. Or, the adaptation might be more subtle, such as noticing a confused look and offering a new example or another form of explanation. Overall, do you think the speaker's adaptations worked? Would you have done something differently that you think would be more effective?

OER IMAGE SOURCES:

van Amstel, Erwin. "Audience". Flikr. https://www.flickr.com/photos/kl/8443643/in/photolist-Kh14-4FWemp-7VS3Ld-JmabME-euaXbY-J5vCiU-sbizx-o2ub3b-8tCQab-adU88S-p1gMzR-pEtmm-pEtqK-d63fbf-7pdFKL-f8FnFm-o2sZTU-ag6wQz-BjKXny-ePnbqz-jp9H74-a9tagx-fdwyVA-8Bw2U8-8Bz9Yf-2e8z82z-5KfEiY-dcgno5-djhsKL-5sqdxP-tmZej-5hnmC5-WQLv6S-8rFtE3-47YbxR-awgnhB-8Uin5-9Ziqd1-nK6kj4-5mDNZY-btehnc-kqs3W-7CeA1-ncakxv-6RVjhu-eji5pj-cHm6LA-awgmDZ-5zpM7w-6fYbrL. Accessed 18 April 2019. [CC BY-SA 2.0]

OER TEXT SOURCES:

"Adapting to Your Audience." Lumen Learning. https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-communications/chapter/adapting-to-your-audience. Accessed 18 April 2019. [CC BY-SA 4.0]