Preparing for a Conference, Doctoral or Professional Presentation

Abstract

At some stage of their career development, doctoral candidates, qualified psychologists and other professionals are called upon to make formal presentations at conferences or in work or clinical contexts. For many people, public speaking can be anxiety provoking. Thorough preparation and forethought can help manage anxiety so the speaker can feel empowered to develop confidence, new experiences and skills. A successful presentation on research findings, systemic or clinical issues, or innovative recommendations for service provision can have a significant impact for service users, other psychologists, professional organisations, policy makers or commissioners, who all potentially stand to benefit. Giving a presentation can also have various professional advantages, including creating opportunities for collaborations, networking, developing new ideas, the raising of a professional or organizational profile and even potential employability opportunities.

This paper will discuss strategies to help the potential presenter ensure they meet designated or pre-set requirements, hone skills, convey the intended message and optimize professional opportunities. This paper will focus upon: being clear about the aim of presenting; the importance of a dissemination strategy; selecting the most appropriate context to deliver your presentation; preparing an abstract or presentation summary; explanations and recommendations on how to deliver a successful presentation (be that poster presentation, individual presentation, symposium, or workshop); the presentation delivery; answering questions from the audience; and maximising the associated opportunities.

Clarifying Objectives: Why Give a Presentation?

Prior to giving a presentation, it is helpful to consider your motives and objectives in doing this. Motivations may include personal or professional aspirations. Objectives might include: to obtain feedback on a data set or intervention; benefit or raise awareness around the needs of a particular client group who have been ignored or side lined; challenge thinking around a particular prevailing paradigm or practice; promote your work within your place of employment; enhance your reputation; or meet a requirement of your doctorate training.

Presenting at your place of work can provide an opportunity to get constructive advice on your presented material and can bring the additional benefit of ensuring that colleagues know about your research. It could also provide a forum where there is a supportive audience who can give constructive and helpful feedback about your work and presentation which can be used to refine future presentations and may also inform your research. Presenting research at a stage when you have not finished your recruitment or in further research you may be planning to undertake can provide the additional opportunity of helping to recruit participants. Doctoral programmes are likely to require doctoral candidates to make presentations about their work at various points in the completion of the degree, which provides an opportunity to get feedback on your work and to receive this from a number of individuals at various points in the process. You can then use this feedback to develop all aspects of your work.

Dissemination Strategy

A dissemination strategy makes use of various channels to engage with audiences to deliver clinical, theoretical impact with regards to research findings. If you have conducted research to meet the requirements of a doctorate training, a health trust or third sector organisation it is imperative to have a dissemination strategy, so your findings can be shared and potentially influence thinking. A conference or professional presentation can form an important part of a dissemination strategy. When presenting research to disseminate findings, you should condense the content. Considering your objectives for presenting can assist you to select only relevant content for the presentation. Presenting is a method of disseminating research findings which is often faster to complete than writing a peer-reviewed journal paper, although it can be helpful preparation. Hanley & Steffen, (2012) have written about some of the issues to consider when writing for publication. If you want people to know about your research, you need to actively promote or publish it to the appropriate audience. Presenting can inform your dissemination strategy by highlighting the areas of your research that provoked interest and engagement from an audience so you can better assess readiness for change. Presenting might also influence your dissemination strategy as you learn about who to target for potential adopters and how changes might integrate into current systems. The Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards of proficiency include a standard relating to   communication (8.9) that requires psychologists to be able to communicate ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences, so this is a professional requirement   It is courteous to discuss your planned presentation in advance with a research supervisor or line manager. They may also be able to provide useful experience and support.

Context: Selecting where to Present

Chose an appropriate conference or professional meeting to present at, that matches the aims and objectives of your own work or research (even if this is incomplete). Most, although

not all, professional meetings or conferences, take place every year or every couple of years. Start by presenting at your place of work, placement or university, before considering a national and then international conference, although this of course, is a matter of choice.

Your place of work or placement may have regular seminars, journal paper discussions groups, team meetings or a variety of clinical meetings where it may be useful for you to present your research. If your work presentation is to form part of a regular meeting, consider the interests of the people attending and what the meeting is normally about. You may want to ensure (as far as it is possible) that your presentation is linked in with these interests and requirements.

Most large conferences have a number of streams or themes running throughout or if you are presenting at your place of work there will be topics that are more relevant, therefore you will also need to consider how your proposed presentation fits with these. It may be helpful to look at the kinds of papers that have been presented at previous conferences, whilst it is tempting to select conferences in exotic locations, this may not benefit you or in fact the other conference participants. Once you have found a suitable conference, look at the conference themes and think about how your research aligns with the theme/s and if it does not, look for another conference. You can register on websites that will keep you informed about forthcoming conferences, on the basis of discipline, specialist area or geographical location. For example https://conferencealerts.com, https://conferencemonkey.org or https://allconferencealerts

If you are presenting at a conference you still have to meet registration charges. Alternatively, if you offer to act as a conference volunteer for part of the conference you may obtain a free place. Most conferences have a student or early career researcher stream and many offer discounted rates or bursaries. There are a range of places you can apply to for conference

attendance and presentation. For example, the British Council, Leverhulme Trust, and other voluntary organisations. The British Psychological Society (BPS) also has an early career/post-doctoral bursary scheme where successful applicants will receive £250 towards attending a national or £500 towards attending an international conference. The scheme is competitive and applications are currently assessed twice a year, in April and October.

The Abstract or Presentation Summary

Once you have selected a suitable conference, you will need to submit an abstract (often done via the conference website). For a professional or work presentation, an abstract or summary of your presentation may or may not be required but preparing one can be help enable you to clarify your points and define a structure. Abstracts or summaries are also a way of advertising your work and encouraging people to attend the presentation. When presenting research, also note that you will need to demonstrate clear evidence that appropriate ethical permission has been obtained. There are four options when presenting at a conference: presenting an individual paper; a workshop; a symposium; or a poster.

- *An individual paper* will usually be put into a themed session by the conference organisers with three to four other papers.
- *A workshop* is a presentation linking theory with activities in an interactive session, where participants are actively involved and normally has a training or learning focus. Workshops are not an opportunity for you to collect data but to offer delegates some skills or knowledge and to discuss specific issues. You may be required to give learning outcomes and explain how delegates will participate when they submit your abstract/ overview about the workshop. Workshops are usually allocated more time than presentations. A workshop may not be the easiest presentation to give as a first experience of presenting, though it is possible.

- *A symposium* is usually three to four associated papers submitted together by a group of people as a themed symposium.   Some conferences have a student theme running throughout and if you are training you may want to put together a symposium with your peers, if you can find a general linking theme. This linking theme could be as general as 'research from [insert name of your University or health trust]', or it could be more specific.   You may wish to involve tutors, colleagues or other people in this process, as they may bring some experience of presenting and relevant expertise. Being part of a symposium with colleagues can provide additional support and encouragement when you prepare and deliver the presentation.

- *A poster* requires you to have completed it before the conference. It will detail all aspects of your research, but you will not give a formal verbal presentation. At the conference, posters are put up for delegates to read.   Poster presentations will be discussed in more depth later in this paper.

This paper will focus on presenting an individual paper (which may or may not be part of a symposium), although may be relevant to each of the four possible presentation formats.

When preparing an abstract or presentation summary, regardless of the type of presentation, it is important to devise a title that is clear and explains what will be covered in your presentation. The use of humour in a title is not always successful as humour is culturally located. If your presentation is published, unless the key concepts are mentioned in the title, search engines will not pick it up.   A clear, concise title means delegates will know the content of the presentation, so that you have an engaged and interested audience.

You will also need to exactly adhere to the requirements stated. For example, in terms of word count, your abstract or summary cannot be one word over the limit, as it will be rejected on this basis alone.   The word count for conference abstracts normally varies from between

150 to 250 words. Do not assume that the abstract you wrote for your doctorate or for another purpose can be transposed - it is likely to need re-writing, to ensure that it fits with the conference aims and requirements.   Aside from the word count, other requirements for abstracts can be very specific, for example, the World Association Congress of Psychiatry in 2018, required all submissions to include learning objectives for each presentation. When following any abstract requirement for a conference submission, the headings may be provided or you may want to use the headings (outlined by the British Psychological Society Conferences):

1. *Objectives:* including the primary aim/ hypothesis tested or research question.

2. *Design:* a description/overview of your study and rationale for this selection.

3. *Methods:* how participants were selected, number of participants, materials employed - if appropriate, the methods of data collection and analysis.

4. *Results:* brief overview of the data. For qualitative analyses briefly describe your findings (e.g., themes, categories, discourses identified).

   Conclusions: including   theoretical,   methodological,   applied/policy/practice implications as appropriate and the key limitations of the study.

It may be useful to use the requisite headings to consider what information you want to convey in advance, rather than trying to complete it live onto the conference web page.

When you offer your abstract for a conference, the review process is done anonymously and reviewers do not know who has submitted the abstract.   The conference website will normally provide details of when you will be informed if your abstract has been accepted or not. The organising committee will consider and select or reject each submission. If your abstract is rejected, you can email the conference organisers requesting feedback. If your

abstract is accepted, you can move forward with preparations for the presentation. It is also noteworthy that most conferences produce a hard or electronic copy of all the accepted abstracts which are available to all conference delegates.

Advice about each conference format and suggestions in relation to a presentation are detailed below, whilst there inevitably is some overlap, there are also particular aspects which require consideration relating to the specific conference format selected.

Poster Presentations

A poster is usually offered by early career researchers or sometimes researchers with incomplete data sets. Relevant work undertaken on a course or in a work context can also be presented in posters and may help with professional or personal development through providing an opportunity to present this work and being asked questions in relation to it. Becoming accustomed to answering poster presentation questions may provide good preparation for professional life, a formal paper presentation or even a doctoral viva.

Posters detail all aspects of your research, showing the entire research process and findings (or if the research is incomplete, findings so far). In terms of size, each conference's webpage will detail the exact dimension measurements. Some software packages offer a template for academic posters. Whichever format you decide to use, the principles remain the same. Some conference committees have posters as a separate category and some will offer a poster to delegates if they are unable to accept a verbal presentation.   Posters are a very good way of first entering the conference arena. You can also receive feedback on your work from delegates and engage in conversations about your work. The headings given below are those requested for posters at BPS conferences, but there will be some variation on the headings required depending on the conference. These, although similar to the requirements for a paper

presentation are different in certain respects. The following headings are usually required, though vary depending on the conference:

1. ***State the primary objective*** and the major hypothesis or research question/s (if appropriate).

2. ***Design***: Describe the design of the study and the rationale for the procedures adopted.

3. ***Method***: State the selection criteria and number of participants, material employed, and the procedures followed.

4. ***Results:*** State the type of analysis employed and the main findings of the study. Numerical data may be included but should be kept to a minimum.

5. ***Conclusions:*** State the conclusions that can be drawn from the study, including theoretical, methodological, or applied/policy implications as appropriate.

In terms of the content of your poster, here are some points to consider:

- What is the message that you want to convey? Ensure you have considered your message, as well as how it fits with the conference selected.

- List your hypothesis or research questions and briefly your methodology. If you have data, state what you have found. State why are your findings are important, who they are relevant for and what are their implications are.

- Do not present too much information, the poster is an overview of your research or work in progress, so aim for clarity and conciseness. Posters should not be as densely filled with text.

- Organize the layout of the poster to maximize the message you want to convey. Try and make your poster flow, it should be clear, and the content should follow logically.

- Try and make your poster eye catching and informative. You may find inspiration for your poster by looking at information that is displayed at your place of work - what catches your attention and why does it do this?

- As stated earlier, pay attention to the title, this should clearly define the topic and encourage people to read your poster.

- Use an appropriately sized font (size 24 or larger).

- The use of graphics or diagrams may make your poster more interesting and save words, use summaries.

- Put your email and social media addresses on the poster, so that people can easily contact you. You may wish to provide copies of your poster or a more detailed handout.

Most conferences have a specific time when delegates visit the posters. As the presenter of a poster, you will need to stand by it at the designated time slot so interested people can ask questions or make suggestions. You may wish to think about the kind of questions you might be asked, so that you are prepared with some answers and appear professional. Some conferences hold competitions where delegates vote for the best conference presentation on each day of the conference. The questions or feedback you receive about your poster may provide very useful feedback and guide your research.

The Individual Presentation, Symposium or Workshop

Good preparation is key; it can make the difference between an excellent and an acceptable presentation. Think about who will make up the audience and tailor your talk accordingly. Consider who will be listening, what will be relevant to them and what knowledge they may already have (this will help you to pitch it at the right level, in terms of the content and vocabulary so you do not over-simplify or use language that is too technical). Issues of diversity may require active attention. Shi, Brinthaupt and Mccree (2015) argue self-talk that

is either self-critical or critically assessing one's own interactions with others (social-assessing) is negatively associated with anxiety, in other words the more critical we are of ourselves the more likely we are to be anxious of public speaking. Finally, one way to address this may be to consider what new knowledge you might contribute that would be useful. In this way you might re-frame an experience of being evaluated to an experience of offering value.

If you feel confident about what you are saying, it is likely to enhance the way you deliver the presentation. If you are presenting your own work, you know this better than the audience and are already an expert on it, therefore it can be helpful to hold this in mind. Public speaking can elicit apprehension. Research has shown holding a belief that public speaking abilities can be improved and developed is associated with a lowering of this apprehension. Viewing your presentation as an opportunity to express something, be transformative and a skill that you can improve is likely to decrease your apprehension and increase competence (Stewart, McConnell, Stallings and Roscoe, 2019). When preparing, it may be helpful to consider any presentations (or lectures) you have attended and think about which ones stay in your memory and why. All presenters will have different styles and it is important that you present in a way in which you feel comfortable.

When preparing your presentation, be clear about the key message you wish to convey. Most conference papers are of 20 minutes duration, so if you are going to present a large piece of work, (including but not restricted to a doctoral thesis), you will need to reduce this considerably. You are unlikely to be able to simply reduce your thesis therefore, you may need to focus on either key themes or the most significant or theoretically important findings. Also consider the focus and themes of the conference when making this decision. You may also want to emphasis the original or significant elements of the work. If you try and present too much information you may lose your audience. Further suggestions on reducing your doctoral

theses can be found at Tribe and Tunariu (2016). Keep in mind that other aspects of the research can be presented at other conferences.

Be aware of the conference themes. Most conferences have between three to five presentations in a theme's session. These are loosely organised, such as 'working with young people' or something much more specific. The conference organisers will place your presentations into a particular session or stream. The conference organisers will inform you well in advance where you are presenting and who with. Each session or stream will have a chair, who ensures time limits are adhered to, everything goes smoothly, fielding the questions and discussions that usually follow. Sometimes you will be asked questions immediately after your paper, other times everyone in the session or stream presents first and then then audience has an opportunity to ask questions. Most conferences have parallel sessions, so the people in the audience have chosen to be there and may have specific questions they want to ask. In preparation, it might be useful to give some forethought to the other presentations to see how yours is similar or different so you are considering your presentation in the context of the conference as well as the session or stream and are better equipped to respond to questions that might arise from the audience, the chair or the other presenters.

Prepare by ensuring familiarity with your presentation through rehearsal. The use of sub headings will assist in structuring your presentation and will aid delivery and recall. You may choose to have notes or cards as a contingency. We suggest you rehearse and memorise the opening and closing lines, as these often give the most impact. Open with a statement relevant to the topic you are presenting that is forceful and captures the audiences' attention – a fact or figure, a question to illicit curiosity and identify a knowledge gap, a personal anecdote, or show a photograph or video, for example. You should aim to engage the audiences' awareness so your content elicits something in them – curiosity, interest, – which you can then develop during the course of the presentation. When preparing your closing line, you may re-

visit your opening but even if you do not, you should finish with some kind of conclusion – a tangible, clear and meaningful take-away the audience will remember, such as a call to action; a value statement; implications for clinical practice (e.g. for clients or a service).

Prepare by giving some thought to what kind of an impression you want to make. Selecting what to wear may be part of this preparation process. Consider the level of formality (conferences are usually semi-formal events) as this may influence your wardrobe decisions. If you are presenting abroad, there may be specific customs or rules around dress which you need to be mindful of. Whatever you wear, ensure you feel comfortable.

When preparing your presentation, you may also wish to consider:

- When we are anxious certain brain functions, including our capacity to focus on and retain information may be affected (Robinson, Vytal, Cornwell and Grillon, 2013). Therefore, some days before the presentation, when you are feeling relaxed, refer back to your presentation and remind yourself of the professional and/or academic skills/knowledge base you already have to draw from and consider how this informs your topic.

- Organising your thoughts by using tools such as mind mapping and draw a map/diagram of the proposed presentation structure. You will not be able to speak clearly if first you do not have your ideas well organised in your mind. Develop a clear structure, this might be the sections used in your abstract submission or another structure. It will ensure that your talk is clear and easy to follow.

- The presentation should have a clear start, middle and end with a clear point that ties these together. For example, you might introduce the idea; contextualise the idea (state why it matters); summarise the main concepts; explain the implications; and conclude.

- Hone the message: ensure it is clear and the various points you will be making either build on one another or are connected in a meaningful and lucid way. Less is often more, try and convey a few key findings or points, you cannot present everything. Try and avoid unnecessary jargon or terms the audience may not be familiar with. Telling a story engages the audience. Narrate an idea, as opposed to just imparting information.

- Most presentations use a number of PowerPoint slides, although this is not compulsory. Slides can take the pressure off you, if you feel nervous, as delegates will look at the slides rather than at you. They can also assist with the conveying of your message. If you choose to use slides, only put the key points on the slides, rather than everything you want to say. Slides should be of at least font size 26. The maximum number of words per slide should be no more than 40. You may want to number your slides so while you are presenting you know where you are and can pace yourself. You may want to use a wireless Presentation Clicker / Red Laser Pointer or simply use the keyboard to change the slides but ensure you are familiar with navigating this.

- Do not over-do the PowerPoint graphics, effects or colours. Use colours that are easy to read (and consider the colour combination note that black font can be harder to read for people with visual impairments or intellectual disabilities such as dyslexia). You can use pictures, graphics or /and video clips, but be prepared that access to the latter at a conference may not be straightforward.

- Take the presentation on a memory stick and also email it to yourself, just in case there are technological problems. Also, take a hard copy of your slides with you, both for your own use (to refresh your memory beforehand or refer to during the presentation if you get lost) and additional copies, which may be requested by members of the audience.

- Try and give the presentation to a trusted friend, colleague or peer and ask them to note down anything that was unclear and to give you constructive feedback.

   Practicing your presentation so that you are familiar with the content and the rhythm of your presentation. If you are familiar with the content and have practiced the delivery, this can increase your confidence.

   It always takes longer to give a presentation than you imagine, as you may add things on the spur of the moment, it is useful to plan a talk which takes slightly less than the allocated time.

On the Day

- Make the most of the overall experience. Professional meetings, doctoral and conference presentations involves people listening to you, who you have not met before, but who are interested in the area of your work. Try and enjoy the presentation and the opportunity it offers. People have chosen to come to listen to you and hear about your work. They are there to learn about your topic from you.

- It can be helpful to go and view the room where you will be speaking, so that you know where it is, how big it is and how it is set up. You may want to try standing behind the microphone or computer and practice using them.

- Bring water with you in case your mouth becomes dry during your presentation (which can happen when talking a lot and is exacerbated with anxiety).

- You may be required to leave your presentation with a technical team who will load it up for use in the room of the presentation, if not go to the room early to upload your presentation.

- Attend other presentations to get a feel for the conference or professional meeting and for the audience.

- Use opportunities to network with selected people. Most conferences prepare a list of delegates and people will wear name badges. Attend the social events linked to the

conference or professional meeting, this is an opportunity for more informal or longer conversations.

- Regardless of which type of presentation you give, it is quite acceptable to ask delegates to complete feedback forms, these can prove a useful source of feedback, but it is important to remember that people come to presentations with varying levels of experience and varied interests.

Delivering Your Presentation

- Expect the unexpected: dealing with hiccups might be unavoidable and so be flexible and remain calm if there are issues, for example fewer people than expected, interruptions, time changes or technical problems.

- Public speaking is, for the most part, a one-way monologue (without the cues of guidance or interruptions that other genres of communication might have, such as a conversation with a colleague) therefore practice speaking, unprompted, for a protracted amount of time to improve your delivery. The success of a public speaking is as much about delivery as it is about content and language (Mohan, 2019).

- Public speaking requires you to project your voice. Ensure everyone in the room can hear and sound confident. Speak slowly, clearly and confidently.

- Large conferences provide microphones, either lapel microphones or microphones that you hold. Do not hold it to close to your mouth, as this will distort your speech. The audience will let you know if this happens.

- Presence: be yourself, be sincere and believe what you say so that it comes across in a meaningful way.

- Introductions: begin by acknowledging the audience – this immediately builds a rapport. If you make a (culturally sensitive) joke or a light remark, this can help with

rapport building and set a pace. Also start by introducing yourself and the topic that you want to talk about. If you are nervous, it is fine to mention this, this in itself may actually help, and you may gain the audience's goodwill. A confident and engaging introduction will pay dividends.

- Public speaking can be anxiety provoking (Panayiotou, Karekla, Georgiou and Constantinou, 2017). It might help to verbalize your emotional experience, otherwise known as affect labelling, which had been found to reduce physiological experiences of anxiety (Niles, Craske, Lieberman and Hur, 2015). For example, at the start of the talk if you stumble, you might say 'sorry I am feeling nervous now'. Research has also found that exposure to the experience of public speaking can also decrease anxiety (Cheng, Niles and Craske, 2017) – so practice can really help.

- Coherence: convey the structure to the audience, so that they are prepared for your talk and remind them at various points in the talk, where you are up to. Tell the audience in summary what you are going to cover, deliver the content and then summarise or paraphrasing what you have told them throughout.

- Take cues: Pace the presentation according to how engaged your audience looks (or ask them) – if they seem perplexed, you may want to stop and explain a point so that they do not become too lost as you go on. Equally, if they seem to understand something well, move on. Also, try and get a sense of the atmosphere in the room and moderate your presentation accordingly.

- Body language: Try and stand still and engage your audience. Pacing about can be distracting, though if it is a large room, moving about can be helpful to the audience. Do not read your talk. Look at your audience and use eye contact as appropriate.

- Ending: Ensure that you adhere to time limits, you will be stopped at the allocated time. Have a finishing slide, so that the audience knows that you have finished your talk.

Answering Questions from Your Audience

- You can make an educated guess at the types of questions you may be asked. Prepare by remembering what questions you were asked when you gave the presentation to peers. If you have recently had a doctoral viva, think about what questions you were asked then. There is generally a 5 - 10-minute slot for questions from the audience, which usually only leaves time for a small number of (two or three) questions.

- Listen carefully to any questions asked, perhaps jotting them down. If you do not understand a question, it is fine to ask for it to be re-worded or clarified.

- If you are asked a question to which you do not know the answer, do not try and bluff - it is much better to acknowledge this and offer to look into it.

- If you can, it is better to offer a response that does not labour the point, if the response is too long, listeners can disengage and a very brief response can mean that the question has not been engaged with. Equally, elaborate on the issue sufficiently.

Reviewing the Experience and Maximizing Associated Opportunities

- Ask for feedback on your presentation either informally or formally afterwards and use this to review and learn from the experience. Reflect upon what you learnt and consider what you might do differently. It can also be useful to have a trusted friend or colleague to give you constructive feedback. Use this learning to improve future presentations or to help you develop an academic paper.

- Follow up on the networking and contacts that you made soon after the conference.

Conclusion

There are many motivations for presenting an individual paper, workshop, symposium or poster. This might include sharing information; receiving feedback; amplifying the voices of a particular group (research participants or service users); or challenge normative discourses on a topic. Considering where the presentation will take place is also important. Your presentation might take place at a conference, in academia or in a professional context. If you will be presenting at a conference, it is likely you will first need to submit an abstract. If you will be presenting a poster at a conference, it is a good way to receive feedback on your work. General considerations for presentations in any context have been outlined in this paper, including preparation, execution and follow-up. When answering questions after presentations, you will have considered the audience, context and how best to respond. Reflecting on your successes and areas for improvement afterwards can be a useful learning experience, particularly with regards to your confidence building. Finally, any contacts you made networking should be quickly followed up on – to demonstrate your commitment and maximise on these potential opportunities.

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Special Thanks