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Presentation Consultations emphasize

Form Over Content:

*A new Sheridan Center service makes its
debut*

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It appeared to be like any other academic presentation, though the topic might have seemed more arcane than most to the non-scientific observer. Interested scholars gathered in a room last semester to hear Prof. Nicholas Hatsopoulos, of the Neuroscience Department, give a talk entitled “Ensemble Coding of Movement in Motor Cortex.” After the presentation, which was videotaped, there were questions, comments, and suggestions from the audience. Yet this presentation differed from others in an important respect. In this case, the scholars in attendance, Prof. Tom Webb and doctoral candidate Victor Zabielski, both from the Geology Department, were concerned less with Hatsopoulos’s ideas about how the human brain may instruct the body to move, than with the manner in which he presented information and ideas.

Webb and Zabielski came to Hatsopoulos’s talk to conduct a Presentation Consultation, a free service that the Sheridan Center began offering last semester.

The two are among a group of trained and paid consultants who attend talks on campus with the express purpose of offering feedback to faculty, administrative staff, graduate and undergraduate students who want to hone their presentation skills. The service is offered to members of the Brown community seeking help as they prepare to present conference papers, job talks, or their research to their departmental colleagues.

Upon request, the Center sends one or two trained consultants to videotape a practice talk. To ensure that feedback centers on the mechanics of the presentation rather than on its content consultants from outside the presenter's discipline are assigned. At the conclusion of the talk, the consultants offer immediate feedback on aspects of the presentation – its delivery by the speaker, but also its structure – which can be modified to make it more clear, engaging and effective. The videotape, which the presenter keeps, is sometimes used in the discussion period to focus in on a particular part of or problem with the presentation.

Hatsopoulos saw his Presentation Consultation as a chance to improve a talk that he may use on the job market in the future. He believes the feedback he received, which focused on the need to emphasize what is novel about his research and to make better use of slides images, will “absolutely” improve his presentation. After the session, he said he realized the need to rework the introduction of his talk and, specifically, to put his research into “a larger perspective,” one that will answer the question, “How does this all relate to the big issues in my field?” Hatsopoulos also said that doing the consultation will help him when he has to present to groups made up of specialists and non-specialists alike. “It’s easy to talk shop and use lingo, but it’s important to get your points across to people who are not specialists in your field,” he said.

Of the consultation, Hatsopoulos said, “It’s something I’ve always wanted to do.” And though he admits, “it’s a little embarrassing,” he believes the consultations can benefit anyone. “You’re made aware of little behaviors you’re never aware of when you’re presenting...I think it’s a wonderful service. First of all its free, and you have people who are experienced” offering feedback.

As a consultant, Webb says his role is “to listen and try to understand what the presenter is saying and to look carefully at what my impediments to understanding have been.” He says he takes note of the speaker’s “manner of

presentation, wording, jargon, set-up and the use of visuals,” and other features of a talk that can compromise clarity.

Zabielski, along with M. Shane Heschel, a past Sheridan Center Graduate Teaching Fellow, actually participated in the first Presentation Consultation ever held. Catherine Cooper, an MA student in Environmental Studies, requested the inaugural consultation in preparation for the formal presentation of her thesis to her department, a requirement of her program.

“I feel my role is an independent observer, as someone who is outside the presenter’s field,” said Zabielski. “We’re not looking so much at content as presentation...Many people can tell you what is a good presentation and what is a bad presentation. The consultant’s role is to break the presentation down, saying why some elements are good and why some are bad.”

Cooper, like Hatsopoulos, found the experience worthwhile. Asked if the consultation aided her when she made her formal presentation to her department, she said, “Absolutely. It helped me in two ways. Getting the feedback was great and just having extra people to present it to, to run it through with, was great. The more you present something, the better it’ll be.”

The feedback, according to Cooper, who was eventually awarded her MA, “was very helpful. They helped with things like eye contact and volume, basic things.”

Also like Hatsopoulos, Cooper benefited from feedback that Heschel and Zabielski gave on her use of visuals, in this case computer-generated slide images. “After the presentation we went back over the slides one by one and the consultants gave me suggestions on the visual aspects of the presentation,” said Cooper. “They pointed out things that weren’t clear, or if some images were too busy.”

Added Cooper: “If I had to present another paper, I would definitely do it again. It was a great way to get feedback from people who may not be familiar with my topic, and to get insights on how to improve the presentation.”