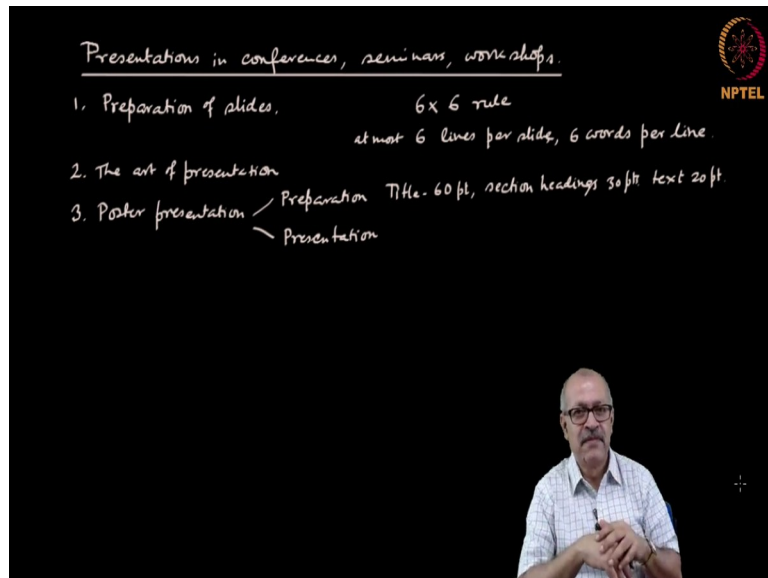


Research Methodology
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Lecture - 64
Presentation in Scientific Conferences Part 02

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Now we come to the art of oral presentation. One common problem is that when you are presenting before a learned audience for the first time, you might become nervous. It happens to everybody. It happened to me definitely; when I presented for the first time it happened. A good way of handling that is to smile at the audience. When you go up the podium to start to speak, look at the audience, make eye contact and smile. That takes care of your nervousness, more or less.

In the presentation, adopt a conversational tone. If you memorize everything, then you are simply speaking from memory. It looks artificial. Rather take a conversational tone.

The slides are there and you are presenting. You should still make eye contact. You should face the audience. You should not look at the slide and talk. A very common mistake is where the speaker turns back to the audience, looks at the slides and simply reads the slides. Very bad idea. Only when you need to refer to something with your pointer, you look at the slide and do the pointing. But after that, always address the audience, make eye contact with the audience. This is very important.

One very disturbing habit I find in most Indians is to start a talk with the word 'So'. They will start with 'So'. No, because 'so' always comes in sequel of something that is already said. Something has been said, so ... you can say that. But you cannot start a talk with the word 'so'. Definitely avoid that. Practice avoiding that. Rehearse talks before your friends, and maybe before just a mirror. Every time be very conscious that I will not start the talk with the word 'So'.

In international conferences, you have to be careful of the fact that the audience might not be exposed to our way of pronunciation. We have a specific kind of accent. We pronounce words differently and that too, there are differences between the English pronunciation in North India, in South India, in East India, in West India. We have the influence of our own native language on the way we speak English and the listeners might not be exposed to that. So, speak slowly, pronounce each word separately, do not join words except words like 'don't'. Otherwise, do not join words.

Speak every word separately and practice speaking that way. Many people have the habit of speaking fast. You have to deliberately cultivate the habit of speaking slow. Even though you might be rushing through the talk, still your speaking should be slow, cultivated, as the idea is to get the message across.

Do not try to tell the audience everything that you have done. That is hopeless. You cannot do that because there is no time for that.

So, always focus on the big picture. What was known before you started the work, additionally what have you done, and as a result in what way knowledge has improved. These are the essential three messages. Try to get that message across.

The whole idea of presenting in a conference is to get the people in the audience interested in reading my papers. If they get interested, they will search my papers, read them, download them. All that will happen, if I can get them interested. So, the whole idea is not to tell the whole thing, but to get them interested.

At the end, you have to give some take-home message, so that when the person goes back, he has a lingering thought that this man presented this. So, I have to look up this further. So, there has to be some take-home message.

At the end, when you have finished, there will be a question-answer session and the president of the session will ask the audience to ask questions and there may be questions. Since you are unable to present everything within the time allocated, it might be good idea to utilize the time for the question-answer session in a productive way. During the whole talk, you have left a few questions unanswered which you are expecting to be asked in the question-answer session, which will allow you to answer those questions. As a result, present something more, thus utilizing the question answer session in a productive way.

So, for somebody who is an experienced presenter, it is possible to present in such a way that will invite certain questions that you want to answer. But otherwise, there can be questions and you have to answer them.

There may be situations where a questioner challenges you or ask the question in a attacking tone. It is possible. In those situations do not lose your composure. Thank the questioner that he or she has raised that point, and try to answer the question as best as you can.

There may also be situations where the questioner has pointed out some error that you have made. Thank the questioner profusely and do not try to defend an error. This is a very bad practice. You should not try to defend error. If there is an error you simply admit that, and say 'I will correct it'.

If there is a question whose answer you do not know, do not try to manage. You simply say that I do not know. In science, it is not a discredit not to know something. But not to know and not knowing that you do not know is a discredit, or not knowing and trying to defend still is a discredit. But, simply saying that 'I do not know' is fine in the scientific community. That is a perfectly normal behaviour. So, you should admit if you do not know something.

This experience of presenting before an audience is valuable. It is a valuable experience and a learning experience, and that is why I would recommend all PhD students should try to attend at least one international conference and at least one national conference within their PhD tenure.

If the funding for attending an international conference is not available, then at least try a good conference held in India, so that it does not cost much to attend it, where international audience will be there. Getting that exposure is very important.

Now, there is another method of presentation, as you know, poster presentation. So, I will now come to poster presentation. Here also there are two issues; one is preparation of the poster and presentation of the poster.

How do they compare an oral presentation and a poster presentation? In a oral presentation, all the presenters are on the same pedestal, they have the same chunk of time. Except for the plenary talks or the keynote addresses, all presentations are normally of the same duration.

So, everybody has the same amount of time available and that is the time you are able to interact with anybody in the audience. So, you cannot personalize exchanges, which is possible in a poster presentation.

Some people have the idea that the oral presentations are more prestigious than poster presentations. That is not quite so, because there are some things which are better presented as a poster, there are some things which are better presented in an oral presentation.

So, you have to get rid of that idea that oral presentation is prestigious, and poster presentations are not. That is not a good idea to have. In an oral presentation you have a fixed time to interact with the audience. In a poster presentation you have a long time to interact with the audience. In a oral presentation you interact exactly the same way with everybody in the audience, while in a poster presentation you can fine tune personal interactions, which is not possible in a oral presentation.

So, in many cases one prefers poster presentation. Like the oral presentation, in a poster presentation whole idea is to get the message across: I have done this and I will expose this work to as many interested people as possible.

But in a conference everybody may not be interested in your work. They may be working on different areas. They may be cursorily interested in knowing what you have done, but not in the details, because only somebody who is working in that area or a

related area will be interested in knowing all the details. Otherwise, people will be interested in knowing what it is all about.

The way people normally attend poster sessions is that they go from poster to poster essentially trying to figure out what it is all about. And out of, say, a hundred posters that are lined up, they would decide on 3 or 4 on which they will spend time, they will like to learn that in a greater detail. Therefore, the right way of presenting a poster is to prepare a 3 minute brief outline of the work. If somebody comes to your poster simply say that: what it is all about, what questions are you asking, how did you do that, and what is the take home message, just within 3 minutes. And then ask: 'would you like to get some detail'?

If the person is interested, he will say so, or he might ask questions. Then you can answer and that may lengthen the discussion. But in most cases they will learn about the overall area of your work and they will move around, because, they would like to know about the next poster. Finally, if they find that, yes, there were something that I would like to know in detail, they will come back to your poster.

The major error that most presenters make, especially students when they go to a conference to present poster, is to catch the person who has just drifted to your poster, and lecture for half an hour. Never do that, because that person may not be working in that area, he may not know the background in that area, he may not be interested in that area.

If you simply keep on lecturing him or her for half an hour, he or she will not be able to move because of simple courtesy, but he will be bored. He is losing his time, because he needs to go to other posters to find out what these are all about also. So, do not detain somebody against his or her wish, always prepare a 3 minute brief, present that, and then ask, "would you like to have some detail?"

You will find that, out of the whole number of people who are there in the conference, maybe 3-4 people would be interested in your work. Now, the whole idea of the presentation is to catch those people, catch the attention of those people.

There are few things about it. One: how would you prepare the poster, so that it is eye catching, so that anybody from a distance will be able to spot it? For that, the poster has

to be well lead out. Normally the conference organizers will tell you what would be the poster board size. Is it in the landscape format, or in the portrait format? You have to start working from the size.

You can prepare a poster using ppt, a single ppt slide may be the poster. Or, if you are using Latex, then there are various formats available in latex by which you can do that. But remember, a poster has to have the title, then the names, and then the body. The commonest mistake is to put all the materials of paper in the poster as a result of which the letters become small. The whole poster becomes riddled with words text. That should not be done, because nobody is going to stand there and read the poster. You are there to explain what is what and therefore, you should put in the poster only that which you will need in order to explain something. A picture, the picture of the experimental set up, an equation, the parameter values, these are the things that we will need and things should be as bullet points. The way you present in a oral presentation, same way in bullet points, so that while you speak, you may point to certain points.

So, make the poster so that it is aesthetically pleasing and it can be read from a distance of about 1.5 to 2 meters, so that each letter can be read. In order to ensure that, again the font size has to be large enough. Again I would say that do not use mixture of different font families in a single poster. That looks bad. Use only a single font family.

The equations are normally made with a certain font and the rest of the poster, that is, the text part of the poster should be in the same font. The section headings and subsection headings can be in a different font. So, either you prepare a powerpoint slide or in latex you can you can prepare that.

All that I am insisting on is that it should not be verbose. Text should be used sparingly, the poster should be dominated by images, pictures, or equations which you need, in order to explain things. Normally we make posters as: the title in 60 point, section headings in 30 point and the text in 20 points or larger. This is the minimum requirement, otherwise it will not be legible from a distance.

Remember, you have to be next to the poster for the whole period of the poster session. Never drift away because nobody is coming to your poster. No, because somebody might come your poster when you had drifted away somewhere else. Do not have the poster hanging somewhere and you are chatting with your friends. Do not do that.

The whole purpose of a poster session is that you have to catch the attention of the prospective peers, who are working in the same field and you have to tell your work to them. When your own presentation period is over, then you can go to other posters.

When you attend a poster session, you have to stand in front of each poster to find out what is the crux of the matter, and then drift out to the next one, then next one, so that you get more or less an idea about the whole range of things are being presented. Then decide on which one you would like to concentrate on, like to know more detailed about, and go there and discuss with them.

Now, if somebody comes to your poster and after your first 3 minute outline presentation shows interest, asks questions, then engage with them in greater detail, because they are really interested.

Now, that greater detail might involve things that you have not put in the poster. So it is a good idea to carry a laptop computer with you, so that if there is a question or you want to tell something that is not there in the poster, some detail, maybe you have done an experiment, and you have got a experimental video which you would like to show, simply open the laptop and show them, so that the engagement with those interested people becomes more detailed, elaborate, and from that something comes up.

So, the poster presentation has a style. One of the commonest mistakes of many students is that, they go to a conference with the peculiar idea that the job they have to do is to present their work. No, you are also an audience. The whole idea of going to a conference is to present your work and listen to the others' work. That is why you should also attend the other talks and in the poster sessions other peoples' posters and that way you have to maximize the advantage of going to a conference. The advantage, as I said, is networking, talking to people, exchanging ideas. It does not happen if you simply go to your session, present your paper and disappear for some tourism trip. No, do not do that.

Always keep some tourism time after the conference. That is perfectly fine. But during the conference you have to be focused on maximizing the effect of the conference. So, you have to be in the conference, you have to interact with people. During the tea time, coffee time, lunch time, do not eat alone. Make friends, talk to people, and go to dine with them, lunch with them, have coffee with them, sit down and discuss problems.

If you have a problem and you do not have a solution, if you have a senior person present there, you simply present the problem and most people will be happy to offer a suggestion. This is the main advantage of a conference.

To summarize, in preparing a poster make sure that it can be spotted from a distance by somebody who might be interested in that area, it should be aesthetically pleasing. You should not make it verbose, should not make it full of text. It should be dominated by images, and pictures. When you present, avoid the common mistake of catching somebody and then lecturing him for half an hour. Always present a very brief summary of what you have done, because the person who is coming is only interested in knowing what it is all about. You have to be aware of that.

Then, if the person is interested, he will come back and ask further questions. So, present in such a way, so that the people who are really working in your field or are interested in your field, come to you, ask you further questions, and you can then engage in more personal interaction with that person. That is the advantage of a poster session, which is not offered by an oral session.

So, the poster session has to be conducted in such a way, the person has to present in such a way, so that one can get the maximum advantage out of it. Exposing my work to the people who are interested in knowing my work, that is the whole purpose.