

Jennifer Yowell

Hello and welcome everybody to week three of spark. Our theme this week is presenting your work. And to learn more about presenting, I'm talking with Dr. Paul Fyfe. Thank you for talking with me today. I'm glad to have you.

Paul Fyfe

Hi, it's a pleasure.

Jennifer Yowell

So we'll go ahead and get started with some questions for you.

Our first question is to tell us a little bit about your academic background, your current role in higher education, and maybe how you became interested in your field of study.

Paul Fyfe

Yes, so I'm an associate professor of English here at NC State University. My background is in 19th century British literature, as well as what's called digital humanities, or how we can digitize our materials, as well as explore different digital and computational methods for the research of them. While I study the history of 19th century literature and writing, I'm also interested in how we use emerging computational techniques to research and explore those in ways that are new and kind of experimental and of interest to NC State.

Delighted to find out. So I got interested in that just as someone who was simultaneously curious about the history of literature and culture and who after college got jobs in publishing and then new media rose and fell on the dot com bubble just started in graduate school to explore some research and job opportunities that were in digital archives of historical 19th century figures. It just sort of was happening alongside and just been pursuing those intersections and luckily my own curiosity in this realm.

Jennifer Yowell

That sounds so interesting. It seems like life is continuing to move so fast these days. What are some of the ways that you balance your research and publication efforts with your academic responsibilities, such as teaching, mentoring and service?

Paul Fyfe

But I think it's always good to start with a clear idea of what's expected of you and make sure, you know, that's all above board with your department head, college dean your university appointments and have a kind of practical sense of what you can undertake, including with your own obligations outside of academia, I mean, we have got, two children and the sort of demands of running a family and running them all over town. I

figure out what the priorities have to be at different moments in a career. Understanding there are times you have to keep the main thing, the main thing. You know, and that's when that was the dissertation or in the assistant professor years, knowing that my expectations, everything is sort of hinged on being able to produce. Those big projects and a monograph so scheduling time for myself every day you know, as, insofar as that was possible for the writing or that project and really paying yourself first as it were and then figuring out how to get the rest of it done. One of the things I like about being an academic, is it has a kind of built in generosity, in research, you're sharing and teaching, you're sharing, and even in service, like you're sharing of your time and and your ideas. At the same time, I think I really had to learn how to balance that with the necessity of saying no.

While we feel bad about that occasionally, I think it's a totally normal and should be normalized practice. In fact, someone gave me the advice a colleague of ours actually many years ago of keeping what she called a no list every year

I learned this at her party on New Year's Day where she's celebrating all the things she said no to in the last year. I started doing this myself for a few reasons. One is that it sort of makes visible all of the decisions, that you've made and kind of honors, you know, how you're protecting your time as much as committing it. It ends up kind of gamifying that a little bit. So even though I said yes to doing this, Jennifer, there was a strong temptation to add this to my 2024 no list. No, I'm just kidding, but the ability to say no and do it professionally, I think is, is, is really important in terms of managing your time and your commitments. Prioritizing what you have to do and want to do and protecting your time. As well.

Jennifer Yowell

Absolutely. I totally hear that. It's interesting that no list.

Paul Fyfe

I'd recommend it.

Jennifer Yowell

You know, it can be really difficult, especially when, you know, researchers are so passionate about their work to select maybe one to present. How do you decide on a Specific topic or aspect of your research to present and what are some of the key elements you focus on when preparing to present your research?

Paul Fyfe

Sure. Well, I think there's a few different approaches to that question. One is,, if you are wanting to stay professionally involved and there are certain conferences that you'd like to attend, right?

That can be one way of shaping. Okay, well, what do I have that fits? How do I just get to this place where I want to be anyway? Another one is I want to demo some new material and see if it flies. So, you know, what do I have that is far enough along, but I would still be interested if people are into the idea.

Another approach is, you know, frankly promotional. For example, I've got a book coming out at the end of October. So now I'm thinking about, okay, how do I get out there people's interest in this new publication I have coming out without necessarily retreading old material. I think all of those considerations are factors for me in deciding about conference presentations. The second part of that question gets into the actual materials of what it is that I select. And there I think, you know, the challenge is to keep it simple. It is hard to reduce.

The complexity of our research or, you know, our teaching experiences into something that an audience can easily manage. So I try to keep in mind what was taught to me by a fellow graduate student back in the day, which is to have an interesting, sexy, provocative, theoretical framework. And then deliver about one, you know, really good and interesting example and close with some reflections of speculations. And that's really your whole job. Now this differs, of course, between disciplines, really even fields within disciplines in terms of the norms, of how we present you know, for my field, it is generally a 15 to 20 minute kind of mini lecture.

A lot of people read off of papers you know, in other fields people are more extemporaneous or are working off posters or, you know, pre circulated papers or that kind of thing. So that probably also would factor into their decisions about what they're going to pick and how they're going to deliver it.

But I'm happy to talk more about my own process. If you like,

Jennifer Yowell

Well, that's wonderful. Yeah. You know, it's really interesting because 15 to 20 minutes is like the perfect time. I think, you know, not. Overwhelm an audience or have so much that they just lose your train of thought and in terms of what you're trying to present.

Are there any particular skills or practices you recommend for developing an effective presentation? How do you ensure that your presentation is engaging, and accessible to your audience?

Paul Fyfe

I've tried to learn from the people I admire who are engaging presenters, and that included my own teachers and I had a teacher in grad school who taught a lot of Shakespeare and dramatic literature.

And you could tell on stage where she performed and her whole rationale for this was pedagogical. She said that if you aren't someone to notice that people aren't really going to, you know, know about what it is that you're saying. So I'm not saying, you know, everybody has to be fairly dramatic, but the point I'd take away and would emphasize is that in person presentations are a kind of a unique genre, right?

They are a kind of technology in a way. Like, you know how to use one technology or another, we really have to think about what's special about being in person. What is it good for? What is it, not so good for? Or at least what are other things better for it? For example, the oversharing of abundant details and hyper packed presentation slides with information and this is maybe not the best use of that kind of interface.

So I think, for me, thinking of it as a sort of genre of academic performance has helped. For that, I approach what I'm going to say more like a script than a paper. I really think you have to rewrite whatever it is that you are going to say in mind of speaking it rather than reading it.

I try to write myself, a script and, practice it to hear how it's going to sound, make sure that the sentences aren't, you know, half a page long, that I'm taking breaks, that I'm doing some signposting for where we are in the argument to remind listeners and where we're going. Generally make sure that it's going to be easy for audiences to assimilate as listeners, not necessarily as academics. And certainly not as readers. The other thing that's really helped me is A practice of presentation style called Pecha Kucha. This is something I was made to do at a conference and then, have inflicted upon my own students. It is like PowerPoint haiku in that it's very restrictive. You're allowed to 20 slides at 20 seconds each set to auto advance for just one image at the most, no more than five words, if any. I don't necessarily use that for all my presentations, but I've taken away from that how Less is more in terms of connecting with an audience that you're not up there to show them everything you know, you're, you're sort of up there to, to share with them a story and how to understand it and oftentimes that means not necessarily Giving them everything, all of your data points and all your possible graphs,

all the details which are going to be impossible to absorb, or at least have diminishing returns after a moment.

But instead try to create for them a narrative. In which to assimilate new information. And sometimes, you know, thinking about your presentation, not just as a script, but also as a story can really help, like what's the trajectory and how can your slides support that engagement.

Not necessarily as the burden of evidence, right? But , as you know, maybe one image provocations as things that pique their interest rather than , demonstrate, all of the details. So I've also tried to use a lot of blank slides and this may be a personal thing, but I think it's worth considering, like, given how much we invest in being there .

and managing your audience's attention. Oftentimes you want that attention to come back to you. And it maybe annoys me more than it should when a presenter is still talking about something that is now far afield from the slide that remains projected behind their head. I just drop a blank slide in there to signal it to come back to me now.

I'm managing the audience's attention in different ways. Through trying to be an engaged storyteller through thinking about my visuals. Reflecting my own conference experiences of what it is that I like to see and don't like to see. And that certainly includes most importantly, sticking to your time.

So true. I think I read somewhere you have like eight seconds to capture their attention and then, that's probably gone down now since I've read that, then you have 12 seconds to, to keep them there. You have very little time

some of the things you said were just wonderful, especially with the storytelling, that just captures audiences immediately, I think, and kind of brings them into what you're really trying to get to the heart of what you're talking about, and it's making that personal experience, the kind of connection with them.

Jennifer Yowell

Go into some of the challenges that you have faced when you're preparing to present your research?

Paul Fyfe

Sure, one challenge is just getting started, right? That blank, blinking cursor on the page can be very intimidating? I remember struggling with this as a grad student and my director basically just was like, look, just teach us something. Like, this is something

you already do, right? I think it can be really helpful to just start with an image, with a text, start with an example rather than feel the burden of this argument that you're prepared to make. That you are around other academics, who really like being in the classroom and will have lots of things to say about, any kind of examples that you share.

So for me, it might be, an epigraph, a snippet of text historical anecdote or scenario and just kind of use that to break the ice. and then in some ways move from there and generalize about the larger things I want to observe and the arguments that I'm going to make in the course of the paper.

So that can help me just jump right in. I think the other challenge is oftentimes I am working backward from written material and it can be very hard to figure out what to omit, how to cut and what to keep.

Can be very helpful to suggest which you can't cover. I think, you know, sometimes feel obliged to cover all the bases and worried that won't seem as scholarly if we don't, but an inability to sort of acknowledge the scope of what you're presenting and defer to, you know, to other conversations or to a Q and a afterwards.

I think it can be really useful. And that's the other challenge too, in trying to reduce longer things, sometimes you're better off just starting from scratch, and rewriting for speaking rather than trying to kind of cut and work backwards from something that is, really written for, for reading rather than for, for speaking and listening.

Jennifer Yowell

Yeah, so true. That can be a really big challenge especially when you're writing

There was a quote I saw the other day, which I found fascinating: speech belongs half to the speaker and half to the listener, which I think is so true. How do you handle questions and feedback from the audience during your presentation?

Paul Fyfe

For me, becoming a successful academic. requires us to learn all the different ways of saying, I don't know, without actually saying that people are going to ask you all sorts of stuff. And might be hyper detailed or totally out of left field from what you're talking about or, Going on tangents.

I think rather than agonizing about having to know everything. I really tried to be ready to either defer or really more importantly redirect there are ways of acknowledging the

interest of someone's question without ever having to answer it. I'm going to answer the question you asked me right now, Jennifer, but if I didn't want to, if I had other things to say, I might be like that's, really interesting. But I'll tell you, here's how I come at those issues and just sort of switch tracks to what you're more comfortable saying, or where you feel like your expertise is, or if there are things that you didn't get around to or further points you need to make. That can be an opportunity and a technique to use that. It's saying, I don't know, is not a generous mode of communication, right? As well, because, you know, a lot of things, but it might not be specific to that question. So how do you kind of move to a space where you don't or you don't agree to where you can continue to share?

The other technique here is as you say, the speech is half the audience to turn it right back around. just like an annoying teacher does. You answer a question with another question. And well, that's so interesting. You know, tell me more about how you're thinking about this problem. This also can buy you time as the person turns their question into the comment they really wanted to make. And you reflect further on how to connect, or whether to, whether to move on., if you're in charge of like selecting who gets to ask a question, it's very good to keep in mind how to disrupt some of the typical power dynamics that happen in the sessions where it's always the kind of senior academics you know, typically gender male that that feel most comfortable speaking. So, you know, I tend to look out and see All right, who might be asking a question or raising their hand or is interested who is, not the kind of usual suspect who might be a graduate student or, might be from an underrepresented community within our discipline. And I find that this helps set the tone for a more inclusive conversation that other people, if they see You know, the sort of senior star academic is the one who's talking, they feel more intimidated,, that sort of sets the tone. But the Q and A can also be an opportunity to welcome other folks into the conversation.

Jennifer Yowell

So true. Yeah, absolutely that's so imperative for everybody to feel like their voices are heard. So that's wonderful. Yeah.

Paul Fyfe

I'll also say one more thing is that you know, it's always an option to ask to follow up either after the presentation or Catching up with someone, can I learn more about what it is that you're asking for doing or, , this is going to have me thinking for a while, like, let me get your email, etc. Not feeling like Q and A is the limit of your scholarly exchange with your audience.

Jennifer Yowell

Yeah, absolutely. So how does presenting impact your career and research? What are some of the most valuable outcomes or opportunities that have arisen from, you know, giving a presentation?

Paul Fyfe

In general, just identifies you as an active part of a scholarly community. Among the people you want to see as your peer and who you want to see you as a.

A peer. So it has been extremely important for me, and going back to some of the same conferences as much as that's feasible to just mark yourself as part of that academic community. I think it also really helped me once I realized. how any given presentation fits into my larger trajectory and I'll tell you where that went wrong.

Also a hard lesson in graduate school. I gave a presentation that went really well. A distinguished person - the journal editor came up to me afterwards and was like, Oh, that's really interesting. I was so interested in this. What are you planning on doing with it? And I was just like, I don't know, I wrote it for a class.

That was like the awkward end of the conversation and afterwards I realized that I had missed a big opportunity that conferencing should be a part of a larger profile and a sense of who you are in the field and where you're going. So that Any kind of interaction that it produces you know, you can move on, like whether that is in just conversation or people learning about , the future trajectory of your work and being interested to follow or about opportunities for collaborations.

It has been really important to me also just in terms of being noticed. Occasionally when I am sharing stuff that is a little more experimental, then sort of becoming known as, one of the people who's doing this thing. Some people are quite good at devising their academic profile., Oh, yes, you are the person for this or that. I'm not really good at that. But, I think conferencing can help identify who you are and get people interested in where you're going with it, I had one conference in 2016 where I was presenting very experimental work on trying to use computer vision on 19th century illustrated periodicals.

And it interested the community enough where they asked me back the next year to do, sort of, a bigger lecture. Which was super exciting. And that in turn got me connected with different research groups as a collaborator. Including stuff that continues to evolve in the present day, so yeah, it can have some really positive benefits in terms of taking a risk of showing some interesting things, of not just being part of the community, but being part pushing the conversations in the field.

Jennifer Yowell

Yeah, absolutely. And I would also think that it would kind of spark other research interests when you're presenting and then somebody brings up a question or something within your presentation. Maybe you could go in a different direction with this other research that you're doing or something like that. It just sounds like it's so many benefits and you never know who's attending your presentations. Who actually has other things that might be going on, where they work or their academic pursuits and stuff. So, yeah, it's so imperative. Such good advice. Thank you so much.

Jennifer Yowell

How do you stay current with trends and developments in your field and how does this influence your presentations?

Paul Fyfe

So I think going to conferences is a great way of just checking in and you can't see everything, but generally it really helps to see how people are, not just what they're talking about,, what methodologies seem to be in the air and are being explored and what people's concerns are you know, professionally as well as intellectually and, and how they're moving forward.

I have made it a practice to try to read a lot of book reviews published in the journals in my field, especially starting out. Again, can differ from one discipline to the next, I can't read everything, but I found the book reviews really helpful. as a way, not just of learning about the new things that have been published, but also how they are sort of being received and how people are, framing those arguments within the larger trajectories. Of the field. So that's, that's, that was hugely helpful. Also I have found especially within the digital humanities has been uniquely overrepresented on social media for the last, you know, 15 years. That's an entire mess. But historically this has really helped me kind of get a little bit beyond the usual subjects and understand how conversations in that field are also abutting things that I didn't know about that are happening in life., like library and archival sciences, or about public history and digital history or indigenous history, or, all sorts of adjacent fields. That's been of interest to me , in Understanding the interdisciplinary possibilities of my work and also helping me define, well, what is it that I'm doing as part of this bigger conversation that can, you know, uniquely bring something to the conversation.

Regret that. Academic social media has collapsed a little bit, at least within my world because it was so, so valuable in looking beyond the horizons of my own particular field and, even discipline. But it's also a commitment. Takes a lot of time and sometimes creates exposure that doesn't equally fall on people and can come with real risks.

Jennifer Yowell

Wonderful. Yeah, that's so true. So the last question I have for you is what advice would you give to early career researchers or academics who are preparing for their first presentation or anything you really wish? You would have known looking back on the process in that early career.

Paul Fyfe

So one is, do it early and have a draft early and put that draft away for at least a week, two weeks if you can. Because when you come back to it, You'll see it as entirely different, you know, as an entirely different reader or listener.

So, you know, build in time. This whole thing about writing it on the plane, like, You can't do that. Right, , do it early, let it sit. And also, practice. Practice your delivery, especially your timing.

Have someone listen to you and give you feedback, especially in that setting rather than read it. But where was this hard to follow? Where is this really interesting? Are there things about this that I didn't get to,, , seemed like I should do things I can cut, just somebody to give you feedback.

And then don't try to do too much with it and just reflect on some of the suggestions I've given earlier about different ways you can start and style yourself, but to be an accessible and engaging presenter and not to be shy, but to redirect to other areas of your expertise.

In the Q and a and going forward.

Jennifer Yowell

That's such good advice. Yeah. Especially when you're starting out your first presentation, it's so easy to get overwhelmed and it's so easy to want to do everything all at once. And yeah, you're absolutely right. Thank you so much. We really appreciate it.

Paul Fyfe

Well, my pleasure. I hope the course goes well for you and everyone taking it.