

## Lessons Learned From Middle School Part Two

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Welcome back to my reflection on my recent adventures in middle school. To briefly recap, I recently had two separate opportunities to speak at Metro-Atlanta area middle schools. On September 17th I spoke to a group of students at McNair Middle School for their Constitution Day celebration. On September 25th I spoke with five science classes on how to use the scientific method in various careers and in everyday life. In our last article we looked at the similarities I saw in the audiences at each event, how those similarities created some special challenges for me as the presenter, and how those challenges are shared by teachers, lawyers, and nearly everyone faced with public speaking. Today we look at some positive takeaways from those experiences. Specifically, we will look at three general approaches that seemed to work very well with the students, including students from all three categories we discussed last time. None of these ideas are revolutionarily. In fact, many people may see them as common sense. However, they are easy to overlook especially when you are before a group of people.

***Direct Involvement.*** People learn best when they are actively involved in the subject matter. I think this is doubly so for young students, many of which have waning attention spans. Whether it is a math student working through problems on paper, a science student conducting an experiment, or a history student preparing for an oral report, direct involvement keeps the mind active and focused. In short, it is learning by doing.

When headed by great teachers in facilitative environments, schools can be great sources of learning by doing. McNair Middle School has a very active student debate club that encourages students to read, write, and debate in a fun and competitive atmosphere. These same students also participate in moot court competitions. Rather than just reading about court by listening to a lecture, they learn legal advocacy and judicial processes by being advocates in mock court.

Danielle Middle School also promotes direct involvement by their students. They have an outstanding Lego robots program that encourages engineering and problem solving skills, again, in a fun and competitive atmosphere. Danielle Middle school science teacher, and Teacher of the Year Award Winner, James Hawlk showed me how it is possible to promote direct involvement in a classroom atmosphere as well. While presenting an experiment to show how energy affects molecules, Mr. Hawlk almost constantly asked for student input and peppered the entire presentation with questions.

Like teachers at McNair and Danielle Middle Schools, a presenter should promote the involvement of the audience. This is a little counterintuitive to many people. We often think of public speaking as follows: speaker stands up, gives speech, audience applauds at the end, and the speaker sits down. The audience's involvement is minor at best, but does it have to be this way? While speaking with fellow attorney, mediator, and long time friend Bob Berlin on this subject he suggested that even small actions such as asking the audience to answer a question or raise their hands goes a long way to keeping them involved and keeping their attention. It turns the passive action of listening to a speech into the active action of responding to and engaging with the speaker.

***Relating to the Audience.*** People respond to things and ideas that directly tie to their wants, needs, and personal situations. The Audience wants to know how the presentation is relevant to their daily lives. The farther a teacher or presenter moves away from the audience's lives, the greater the risk that the audience will lose interest. That is not to say that a teacher or presenter can never discuss abstract ideas. Rather, he or she must develop a way to tie those abstract ideas to the audience in a relatable way.

This was a struggle in both middle schools, but especially so in the McNair Constitution day event. Mr. Chisholm, the teacher responsible for the event, shared my desire that the students relate to the Constitution and understand its importance. How do you relate the US Constitution to thirteen year old students? One technique that I think worked very well during the presentation was the use of hypothetical situations. By creating a fictional situation you can discuss abstract ideas in a way that is tailored specifically to your audience. When discussing the importance of Checks and Balances, I turned McNair Middle School into hypothetical country. All of the students were citizens and I, because I'm such a nice guy, was made the first king of McNair. Since the middle school was their "home turf" they related to the situation. Even the students who were initially not interested in the event took notice. This then allowed me to use the scenario to contrast the protections of checks and balances with a dictatorship. Even though the entire segment was a piece of fiction, it succeeded in relating the material to the audience while expanding their knowledge. Mr. Hawlk and I similarly used hypothetical scenarios when speaking to his science class at Danielle Middle School. The topic was the use of the scientific method in careers beyond being a scientist. This topic easily opened the door for real life examples and hypothetical situations that kept the students interested and engaged.

The process of crafting a relatable presentation can be a little challenging. You want to expand the audience's knowledge base and you also want to relate to what they already know. Only doing one or the other is not enough. If you attempt to expand their knowledge without being relatable, they will lose interest. If you only discuss what is relatable to them without expanding their knowledge, your presentation is pointless in that you are only telling them what they already know. However, I think being relatable is essential for capturing and keeping an audience's attention. I hope the above has demonstrated that it is very possible to do both, even when dealing with children.

***Energy Brings Out Energy.*** This is probably the most common sense of the ideas discussed today, but it is again easily and often overlooked. I also think this is the single most important point for attempting to grab and hold the attention of all three of the categories of audience members we discussed in the previous article. No one wants to be bored. This fact has been around since people have been around but it is especially true today. Between television, music, computers, games, internet, smart phones, and so on, our brains have become accustomed to near constant input. When presented with a speaker that is low energy, the audience perceives him or her as dull or longwinded and it is natural for the audience's attention to drift.

It is essential that the speaker keep that attention, and it can be kept in part by being energetic. People react to energy. In fact, they often reciprocate with their own energy. When presented with an

energetic speaker, audiences often become energized themselves. Not only do they focus their attention squarely on the energetic speaker, but they often begin to interact with that speaker. The speaker and the audience have now created a closed loop of energy. The speaker's energy energizes the crowd and the crowd's energy energizes the speaker. Anyone who has ever acted on stage understands this relationship, and this is why many actors prefer live audiences.

We can learn a lot about having high energy by looking at the best of our teachers. These are the teachers that love the subjects they teach and genuinely care that their students learn. From Mr. Chisholm talking about the importance of being an educated citizen to Mr. Hawlk discussing the movement of molecules, there is no replacement for genuine passion. A public speaker needs to have a similar passion. He or she needs to have passion for the subject matter and passion for the speech itself. This passion will translate into high energy. This does not mean you have to love the subject of every speech. It does mean that you need to know and understand the subject and have excitement over the opportunity to share your knowledge. Part of this comes from picking subjects that hold your interests. If it is dull to you it will be dull to the audience. The other part is doing your research so you really know what you are talking about.

I think a lot of what makes a good presentation comes to having high energy. Many flaws in a presentation can and will be overlooked by an audience if the presenter has genuine passion and energy for the subject. None of this means that the presenter must be the pinnacle of entertainment or force comedy or anecdotes to keep the audience's attention. This also does not mean that the speaker has to jump up and down and yell every thirty seconds. I call this being superficially energetic and I do not think it goes over very well with audiences. The middle school kids would say the speaker is "trying too hard". In short, if it does not feel natural it will not be perceived as natural. The best energy comes from the presenter who really cares about what he or she says and cares about how he or she is says it.

I hope that my recent adventures in middle school provided an interesting framework for discussing these ideas. There are several other things we can discuss in relation to what makes a good speech such as structure, theme, clarity, cadence, and the monster known as being nervous. However, I think the big three subjects we discussed today can help anyone who has to make a presentation before an audience be it a crowd of co-workers or crowd of thirteen year olds.

I greatly enjoyed my time at McNair Middle School and Danielle Middle School and I thank both for the opportunities to interact with and learn from your students and your faculty.

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Adam M. Sutton, Esq.