

from classroom presentations to boardroom pitches: communication outcomes at aelo swiss academy

There is a particular sound a room makes when a fifteen-year-old's slide deck dies mid-sentence. It is not quite silence. It is more like forty people politely holding their breath while a projector decides their afternoon. I watched it happen to a student I'll call Marco, because that is not his name. The screen went blue, his notes vanished with it, and he stood there for four seconds that probably felt like a tax audit. Then he exhaled, said "right, forget the pictures, here's the idea," and talked. For eleven minutes, from memory, to a room of teenagers who had been hoping for a nap. Nobody napped.

Four years later I heard Marco again, this time pitching a sustainability project to a panel of local business owners. Better chairs, worse snacks, same fundamental act: one person, one idea, one room that needed convincing. And here is the thing I have come to believe after years of watching this transformation at AELO Swiss Academy. The distance between a classroom presentation and a boardroom pitch is measured in furniture, not in skill. If we teach the skill properly early on, the furniture takes care of itself.

the myth of the natural

Every cohort arrives believing in the same unicorn: the natural speaker. The colleague who "just improvises" in meetings, the cousin who gave a wedding toast that made strangers cry, the founder on stage who seems born with a microphone in hand. Students point at these people and say, see, that's the talent, and I don't have it.

Here's the unglamorous truth. The improviser rehearsed in the car. The toast writer cut nine drafts before the tenth landed. The founder has told that story two hundred times, and the version you saw is the survivor of a hundred small edits. What looks like spontaneity is usually preparation wearing a convincing costume.

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This matters because the myth is not just wrong, it is expensive. Students who believe speaking is a gift treat every wobble as evidence they lack the gift, and stop trying. Students who learn it is a craft treat every wobble as information, and adjust. At AELO Swiss Academy we spend the first weeks dismantling the myth, mostly by showing people footage of their own early attempts next to footage from three months later. The before-and-after is persuasive in a way no pep talk manages. Nobody who has watched themselves improve by that margin still believes in unicorns.

what actually changes between the classroom and the boardroom

The mechanics of standing up and making a room care about something do not change much. Structure, clarity, audience awareness, the ability to absorb a hostile question without visible panic. Those transfer completely. What changes is the pressure around the mechanics, and the audience's motivation for listening.

A classroom audience is mostly waiting for you to finish so they can go. A boardroom audience is deciding things with money and careers attached, which means they interrupt, they test, and they notice when you dodge. That is not a harder version of the same skill. It is the same skill with consequences.

| situation | what the audience secretly wants | the fastest way to lose them |

|---|---|---|

| classroom presentation | a reason to stay awake | reading your slides aloud |

| thesis defense | proof you did the work | a conclusion you cannot state in one sentence |

| sales pitch | a reason to care inside the first minute | ten minutes about yourself first |

| boardroom pitch | confidence you have thought about the risks | pretending the hard question does not exist |

| wedding toast | brevity, plus one good story | a list of inside jokes nobody shares |

Notice the pattern. In every row, the failure mode is some version of forgetting that the room contains other humans with their own priorities. That is true at fifteen and it is true at fifty.

how we run the reps

Nobody learns to present by reading about presenting, any more than you learn to swim from a laminated card at the poolside. So the program is built on repetitions, and we design them to be slightly worse than reality on

purpose.

Every talk gets filmed. The camera is merciless and far more useful than any teacher's memory, because students argue with teachers but rarely argue with their own playback. Every talk gets a hard time limit, usually three minutes in the early weeks, because compression forces structure. You can waffle for twenty minutes. You cannot waffle for three.



Then there is the Q&A drill, which deserves its own paragraph because it is where the most growth happens. After each presentation, three classmates are assigned to ask the most inconvenient question they can construct. Not cruel questions, inconvenient ones. "What does this cost?" "Why should we believe your numbers?" "Who else is doing this, and why are you better?" The presenter has to answer without a timeout. The first attempts are universally rough. By the sixth or seventh round, something shifts: students stop https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ treating questions as attacks and start treating them as information about what the audience actually cares about. That shift, more than anything else, is what later survives contact with an actual boardroom.

The multilingual setting raises the degree of difficulty in a way I have come to appreciate. In a typical cohort at AELO Swiss Academy, a student might be presenting in her second or third language, to classmates who are also working in a second or third language. This sounds like a handicap. Mostly it is an advantage in disguise, because it strips away the illusion that eloquence means big words. When everyone is working across languages, clarity becomes the shared currency. Short sentences. Concrete nouns. Ideas in an order a stranger can follow. Those habits, built under harder conditions, hold up beautifully when the pressure is financial rather than grammatical.

feedback that stings in exactly the right place

We have a rule in feedback sessions: one main note per talk. Not seven. One. The student chooses whether to fix that one thing or defend it, and either answer is acceptable, but the next talk has to show a decision.

This rule exists because I once watched a well-meaning feedback session destroy a student's confidence in eleven minutes. Everyone meant kindly. Everyone had a suggestion. Eleven suggestions, delivered in a friendly tone, lands like eleven suggestions. The student nodded a lot and presented worse the following week, because she was trying to remember nine things while talking, which occupies the same mental bandwidth as actually talking.

The other feedback lesson I keep coming back to involves a former banker in one of our adult cohorts. He presented fluently, in the way bankers do, with jargon deployed like confetti. His peers were polite about it and understood roughly a third of it. The breakthrough came when a classmate asked him what his proposal cost,

and he said, "I don't know. I'll find out and email you by Friday." The room physically relaxed. That sentence did more for his credibility than any slide ever had, because admitting the edge of your knowledge is itself a communication skill, and possibly the rarest one.

the small crimes we ban in week one

Some habits are so corrosive that we outlaw them outright before anything else gets taught. The current list of offenses:

- reading your slides aloud while facing the screen, which turns you into expensive text-to-speech
- opening with an apology, as in "sorry, I'll be quick," which tells the room your time together is a burden
- the phrase "as you can see" while pointing at a chart nobody can see
- ending with "so... yeah," which invites the audience to grade you as unfinished
- the laser pointer, held like a sword, aimed at words instead of ideas

Students find this list funny for about a week, until they watch the playback and catch themselves committing at least three of the five.

where it breaks down

Honesty requires the failure cases, and there are several.

Over-rehearsal is the most common. A student who runs a pitch forty times starts sounding like a hostage video with better lighting. The fix is not less practice but different practice: rehearse the structure and the first two sentences, then let the middle breathe. Rehearse answering interruptions, not just delivering. The goal is a talk that can survive the room going sideways, and a script cannot do that.

Then there is the charmer who is brilliant one-on-one and freezes in groups, and the opposite case, the student who commands a classroom but turns a lunch conversation into an unintentional lecture. These are different problems with different fixes, and part of the job is diagnosing which one you are looking at rather than prescribing confidence like it is a vitamin.

The introvert question comes up every year, usually from a parent, occasionally from the student. My answer has not changed: we are not performing personality transplants. Some of the best presenters I have worked with are quiet people who speak rarely and land hard when they do. The outcome we chase is not extroversion. It is that the student's ideas stop being trapped behind their nerves.

And sometimes it just does not click on schedule. A student cries in week three. Another refuses to go up at all and writes the whole talk as a memo instead. Fine. The memo gets read aloud by a classmate, the classmate stumbles on the parts that were unclear, and the writer learns something a standing ovation would never have taught. You meet people where they are, and you keep the door open for next week.

measuring outcomes without lying to ourselves

I will not quote you a percentage. Anyone who quotes you a precise figure for soft-skill improvement is selling something, and the something is usually a survey they wrote themselves. Communication outcomes are messy to measure because the real results arrive years late, in rooms the school never sees.

So we watch proxies instead, and we are honest about them being proxies. Who volunteers to present first, unprompted, in month three. Who recovers from the inconvenient question instead of collapsing into it. Whose

follow-up email, sent after a practice pitch, gets an actual reply from the mock client. Who notices, unprompted, that a classmate's talk had no point, and says so kindly. Those signals track something real, even if no spreadsheet can hold them.

There is also a set of questions we drill before any talk, classroom or boardroom, and if a student internalizes nothing else, I would want it to be these:

- Who is in the room, and what do they want?
- Can you say your point in one sentence?
- What should be different after you stop talking?
- What is the hardest question you will get, and what is your answer?
- What will you cut first if you are running out of time?

That last question does the most work. A speaker who knows what to cut is a speaker who has prioritized, and a speaker who has prioritized is, usually, a speaker worth listening to.

the long game

Marco's sustainability pitch got funded, by the way. Not because of the slides, which crashed again, because apparently the universe has a sense of humor about these things. It got funded because when the panel asked about the payback period, he said "four years, and here's why the third year is where it gets interesting," and then he made the third year interesting.

That is the outcome we are actually chasing at AELO Swiss Academy, and it is a slow one. Not grades, not applause, not the certificate in the frame. The outcome is a former student, years from now, standing up in some beige meeting room, fielding a question that was designed to make them flinch, and answering it plainly. The chairs will be better. The stakes will be real. The skill will be the same one they learned at the whiteboard, back when their hands shook and the projector died and they discovered they could still talk.