

(Artist) Life School: How to hold space and speak in public

Wednesday 26 July, 5.30pm - 7.30pm

Being an artist is more than just making work - it's also about presenting it to our peers and the public. From exhibition openings and whakatau to artist talks and panel discussions, we're likely to be put on the spot and expected to speak about ourselves and our work in public at some stage.

When it comes to speaking in public, everyone has witnessed the good, the bad and the painfully mispronounced. We've invited two very experienced speakers who will share insights on how to create and hold spaces that are socially responsible, culturally engaged and inclusive. This event is an opportunity to learn some tips and scripts to help navigate the often confusing spaces between hosting, introducing yourself, and speaking about your work within an Aotearoa context.

Notes

Jennifer Shields is an artist, advocate and event producer from Ōtautahi. She previously studied at the University of Auckland in both a BFA and a BA, with a focus on queer theory and history. She is currently working with Pegasus Health on improving gender-affirming care in Canterbury, and is the interim director at Qtopia, a social support service for LGBTQIA+ communities, serving Te Waipounamu.

Nic Low is a Ngāi Tahu author and arts organiser, originally from Ōtautahi, who has semi-recently returned home after close to two decades in Melbourne. He is currently the Partnerships Editor at New Zealand Geographic and was programming lead and co-director of WORD Chch Writers Festival in 2021-2022. He holds a Masters in creative writing from the University of Melbourne and has been a guest at festivals across Oceania, Asia and North America. Lowe's multi-award winning short fiction, essays and criticism have been published widely in Australia and Aotearoa.

Notes from Jennifer's talk:

Know your goal!

Understanding what your goal is will help guide you on how to approach the talk, and what style may suit.

- Aim/why are you speaking?
- What is the purpose?

(E.g. At an exhibition opening the goal would be to give thanks and drum up interest for the exhibition. For an artist talk, speaking about your practice and who you are may be your goal).

Less is more!

It's easy to overwhelm yourself if you practise too much.

It can also mean you become too rigid with speaking, or you may feel no space improvising which could lead you to just reading a script/notes.

These things can create disconnect between you and the audience.

- A way you can try to combat this is by using bullet points as prompts for key points.
- If you work on a 'script for a part that you often repeat in speeches (e.g. an introduction about yourself). If you use the same script, you'll begin to remember it without the need for preparation. You'll also gain more confidence with having a part that you know you know!

Speak truly and authentically. Speak in your own language.

This will keep things feeling organic and create connection between you and the audience. People are looking for connection, consider what your goal is and what that specific audience wants to hear.

The way we write is commonly quite different to the way we speak. This can make a speech feel unnatural.

- Try recording yourself and then refining the speech. Like a verbal draft)
- Again bullet points could also help with this. The less you write the more you'll have to say in your own way.

Keep it short and snappy.

A speech doesn't always have to be big, long and memorable.

If you have the chance to go to an opening at the Jonathan Smart Gallery, Jen recommends listening to Jonathan's speeches. He's a great example of speaking off the cuff with a short and organic speech.

The most obvious tip of all... Practise!!

The more you publicly speak the easier it gets for most. Try breaking the fear of public speaking by putting yourself out there.

Practice can also be between friends, you can create opportunities and have a powerpoint party!! A more advanced version of this could be a pecha kucha party, this focuses on the skill of speaking to your slides rather than just reading straight from them.

You can also try to change your perspective. Anxiousness and excitement are very similar emotions. You could try switching from 'oh no! I've got to do this' to 'wow, I get to do this!'.

When it comes to umm's and so's don't overthink it. These are very natural, and think about when other people are speaking, do you find it obvious when they use these fillers? No, not really. It'll be the same for you too.

Although consider if you use these vocal fillers to try and avoid silence. If that's the case, you could work on finding silence more comfortable, maybe even useful! Silence can be used as vocal punctuation or as a way of emphasising a point.

Silence after asking a question, it's very normal so don't rush. Wait 7 seconds, that's how long it takes for most to feel uncomfortable with silence in a talk.

Run with what goes wrong! Do what you need to do to get through public speaking, but sometimes you just have to go for it.

Gendered language-

Language can hold a lot of weight and have a big impact.

Gendered language can especially have a big impact on the gender diverse/rainbow community. It is especially important to actively use neutral language when speaking to an audience, doing so can improve someone's listening experience immensely, all it takes is having respect and committing to putting in the effort.

Thanking people-

- Bullet point list helps.
- A nice way to order your people to thank is to start big and go small, meaning start with the corporations/organisations first, then move on to groups of people, finishing with individuals that you can give a more heartfelt response to. It's a nice way to end on a more personal note.

Heckling and unrelated questions-

- Use it to try and loop back to a relevant point. Redirecting the discussion.
- People remember more of the feelings rather than specific content. Lean on values to direct the discussion back on track.
- Responding with generosity and gentleness. Practising patience.

Jenns main points-

- Short is sweet

- Bullet points
- Know your key message, goal, and the purpose of your talk.
- Practice! Put yourself out there, and say yes to opportunities to speak in public!
- Simple advice can be the best. Sometimes the tips that are constantly repeated are worth taking on.

Notes from Nic's talk:

Most people don't plan to get into public speaking, it usually just happens. So it's a great skill to constantly work on, that way it doesn't have to be so stressful when it does come up. Maybe you can even work towards enjoying it.

Do you find it hard publicly speaking? Do you also find it hard speaking about yourself?

- Kiwi culture often makes you feel too loud and make you feel like you take up too much space. This is something we need to work through!
- Give yourself permission to be proud.
- People respond to passion and recognise truth.

Being thrown in the deep end can help confront fear. It opens up a space where you just have to accept how things go.

Left unchecked can harbour more fear. The less public speaking you do, the scarier it's going to see,.

Sometimes it's not just the audience that's scary, sometimes you can be speaking alongside others you find intimidating. But remember that you wouldn't be there if it didn't make sense. (Remember the point above- Give yourself permission to feel proud)

You may want to write out the entire speech to help you feel prepared, but after that take it back in and reduce it down to the essence. (What's the idea and how does it move to the next thing?).

- After you've worked out the essentials and flow practice on people.
- Rather than writing more to help you feel prepared, practice saying it more to get more comfortable with what you'll be saying. This will also help you with making it sound natural and authentic, and also help with refining.
- Like with visual art, you wouldn't put something out to the public without some feedback or practice.

Find a format that works for you and your goals. What is interesting and useful to you?

When it comes to the pacing it's important to take your time, allow silence and let people reflect.

This is a tip that can translate well with anything that may cause some fear and anxiety- flip those emotions to feel more excited. Anxiety and excitement are very similar internally.

- Try changing the language you use when you have a speech/talk coming up, e.g. 'I have to do this' - 'I get to do this!'
- It's normal to have nerves while public speaking but to help calm yourself, take a deep breath out, try to steady yourself by keeping a deep set breath.
- Doing some body movement earlier can also help by getting out some extra energy and adrenaline.

Interacting with the audience can help keep them engaged and focused throughout your talk. This could be through things like rhetorical questions, or even engaging with direct eye contact.

When it comes to pronunciation of words you may not know, like words that aren't your first language, effort is the more important thing! Take the time to look up its pronunciation and practice saying it. Even with all that preparation it can be easy to slip up when you're nervous. Remember to take your time, breath and just try!

Play to your strengths! There isn't one trick that can work for everyone.

If you're someone who doesn't need to be an amazing public speaker, and only rarely will you be in the position of speaking publicly, do what you need to get through it and be happy with the outcome. If you can do a good speech but you have to read the entire thing from a script, then do that. Whatever helps you express your point and achieve your goal!

- This also applies to the neurodiverse community. Find what works for you! And don't feel discouraged if some tips don't work well for you, adapt these methods to suit your needs. E.g. Some people don't find bullet points useful because they either end up rambling or missing points, you could adapt this method and write more specific bullet points with more details included.
- It's also okay if you aren't 'good' at public speaking or don't enjoy it. If you're a visual artist you have other ways of sharing your ideas. Spoken word is just a useful skill that can help elevate and elaborate on what you may have already said through your art.