Check out videos of the TEDxUAri zona talks and learn how to deal with public speaking nerves

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This is the first in a series of stories spotlighting the inaugural TEDxUAri zona event, which took place on Jan. 31. In each story, Lo Que Pasa will share talks from the event and present public speaking tips from Diana Leonard, director of public speaking and senior lecturer in the Department of Communication, who coached the speakers on their presentations.

The event, built around the theme “The Messy Middle,” began a three-year pilot program for TEDxUAri zona, sparked by the success of the Wonder House at last year’s South by Southwest event in Austin, Texas. Plans call for an event each semester, with details coming soon on the edition planned for the fall. Organizers will soon share how you can apply to be a speaker at one of those future events.

Whether you’re a faculty member teaching a class or a staff member leading a meeting, public speaking might not come easily. In fact, it doesn't come easy to Diana Leonard either, and she gets paid to show people how to do it.

"I hate public speaking," says Leonard, director of public speaking and senior lecturer in the Department of Communication. "I love teaching and I love coaching. I get to be the support figure for someone else. But I don't want to be out front either."

Leonard was enlisted during the fall semester to coach the six speakers – three students and three faculty members – who spoke at the first TEDxUAri zona, held Jan. 31.

The presentation format for TED and TEDx talks – 18 minutes and no notes – is quite different from the types of public speaking most of us know.

But Leonard's tips for the presenters, she says, aren't very different from the ones she gives to her students, or anyone who is anxious about public speaking.

Change your language and thinking

The first step is to alter how you think about public speaking. Instead of thinking of presentations as obstacles, Leonard says, think of them as opportunities.

"When we say, 'I have to do something,' we are resisting what we are doing," Leonard said. "When we say, 'I get to do something,' we are jumping towards it."

Leonard says it's easy to let doubt creep in and worry that you are going to forget everything when, in reality, that is unlikely. A simple key to confidence, she says, is practicing trouble areas.

"Now that you have worked on it, you are less likely to have those negative thoughts," Leonard said. "If you do forget, you know the material, you’ll get back on track and say it differently. That's more realistic than 'I'm going to forget everything.'"

Prepare, prepare, prepare

Outlining your presentation may not be the most enjoyable part of your preparation, but it is important. Leonard says it can help you develop a structure that makes sense and is compelling.

"As you prepare, remember it's all about the audience," Leonard said. "Who are they? What are they interested in? What do they need to know?"

And, of course, practice is key if you want to hit every point as planned. If you really know your message, Leonard says, you're going to be more comfortable when it's time to present.

Remember to breathe

The mental anxiety many people feel about public speaking can often turn into physical responses, such as increased heart rates or rapid breathing. Leonard says the key is to be mindful.

"When our heart beats fast, often it means we are not breathing," she said. "Sometimes it's as simple as pausing and remembering to breathe."

Leonard also says taking a walk before a presentation you are anxious about can help burn off nervous energy and keep you focused.
Learn the skill

It stands to reason that speakers would be experts in the subject matter of their presentation. That's important, but, Leonard says, it's not enough.

"Just because we know some information doesn't mean we know how to deliver the information in a way that is going to be accessible and compelling to the audience," Leonard said.

She says the best ways to hone your presentation skills are to take every chance you have to speak and to read books by experts in the field.

Three books she suggests are:

- "The Story Factor" by Annette Simmons
- "Confessions of a Public Speaker" by Scott Berkun
- "TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking" by Chris Anderson

Videos of three of the six presentations are below. In the March 22 issue of Lo Que Pasa, we'll share more videos along with Leonard's tips on handling technical difficulties during a speech and navigating virtual presentations.

Jennifer Carlson, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology: "Beyond Partisanship, Toward a Better Gun Debate"

Carlson, a MacArthur Fellow, talks about partisanship and the need to see beyond the either-or debate surrounding guns in U.S. politics. She discusses how partisanship often ends conversation, rather than providing a starting point for new questions and new curiosities. Carlson asks us to let go of partisanship and discover the deeper layers that lie within ourselves and others.

Kai Lepley, Doctoral Student, School of Geography, Development and Environment: "How to Survive a Hotter, Drier Future? Think Like a Desert"

Lepley discusses agrivoltaics as a solution to meet the food, energy and water demands of societies struggling to mitigate and adapt to climate change. From a brief history of agrivoltaics through to the current state of this promising land-use strategy, Lepley demonstrates where, why and how agrivoltaics is being adopted in the United States.
Patrick Robles, University of Arizona Student Body President: "Gen Z's Chaotic Coming of Age"

Robles and other members of Generation Z have always heard that they are the generation that will be able to solve the problems of today. But what if you get to the table and there's no seat for you? He talks about how Generation Z's chaotic upbringing has not only prepared them for their calling but also has energized them to step up and make change despite the challenges they face in trying to do that very thing.

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