

Pecha Kucha Presentation experience - Michelle Estrade

Last year I got a message from British Sociological Association's Food Study Group Conference saying that an abstract of mine had been accepted for a Pecha Kucha session. My nose wrinkled in skeptical disdain as I thought, *A what??* The brief description – a 20-slide presentation in which each slide lasts 20 seconds – seemed simple enough. However the official Pecha Kucha website to which I was directed offered little insight into how one might deliver an academic presentation in “20 pictures”. *Does a table count as a picture? How about a photo of the slide full of bullet points I wanted to use?* No clear answers.

I threw together 20 slides just as I would have for any other conference and had a go talking through them with the 20-second auto-timer. My composure was undone by the awkward transitions that seemed to either slip by too quickly or take ages to arrive. It felt like an epic failure, and even though the only witness to the bumbling spectacle was a small audience of houseplants, I was mortified. Dread started to settle in as I realized that this kind of presentation was incompatible with the typical routine of putting all information on a set of slides and deciding what to say the night before the talk. Probably part of a deeper philosophical lesson embedded in the art of Pecha Kucha [eye-roll]... *This is what I get for trying to mingle with sociologists*, I thought.

Upon some reflection, though, it turned out to be true: there was some learning to be gained from this frustrating experience. Though I always feel in control when giving presentations, I realized that I tend to take my cues from the slides. Pecha Kucha, however, seems to oblige the presenter to command the stage in a 6-minute 40-second monologue while the slides play an auxiliary supporting role, like backup singers in a band.

With this in mind, I started over with a different strategy. First, I decided exactly what I wanted to say (and how much could feasibly be said) in those 6.6 minutes. Then I gathered a set of images, diagrams, and keywords that reinforced my points, realizing that a lot of what I wanted to convey could be represented by these simple depictions; the main messages hadn't disappeared with the text-laden bullet points. My prized table full of numbers still featured, and since it would take more than 20 seconds for the audience to absorb it, I made a duplicate slide to extend the viewing time to 40 seconds. The extra bit of time also gave me a chance to breathe and recalibrate before continuing the monologue.

It took a lot of work to prepare that short presentation, but in sitting through the Pecha Kucha session at the conference, I realized it was worth it – especially as an audience member. Because the Pecha Kucha format demands forethought in a way many other presentations don't, every presenter came knowing exactly what they wanted to say, conveying key messages with astonishing clarity. And of course nobody ran over time, so the discussions at the end were robust and meaningful. I've never come away from a conference with such a clear memory of what was presented and discussed. Though I don't think that Pecha Kucha should replace the traditional way we present in academia, I do think it's a fulfilling experience worth trying at least once – both as an audience member and as a presenter.