

INNOVATION

Can VR training help conquer your fear of public speaking?

Practicing in front of a virtual audience can make you a better — and braver — public speaker.

By Travis Marshall — September 5, 2019



Billionaire investor and philanthropist Warren Buffett, a successful man by any measure, struggled with public speaking as a young man. “I would throw up,” he said in the biography *The Snowball: Warren Buffett and the Business of Life*, by Alice Schroeder. “In fact, I arranged my life so that I never had to get up in front of anybody.”

If you’re among the millions of people who also struggle with public speaking, you know how uncomfortable — even terrifying — it can be to have a sea of faces staring at you expectantly. In the grip of anxiety, you might trip over words, lose your place in a presentation, and maybe even spiral into panic. The fear of public speaking, or glossophobia, can be paralyzing, and it can also limit your career growth in jobs that require presentations to clients or executives.

Buffett, who has said that he believes building communication skills is the fastest way professionals can boost their career prospects, overcame his fear by taking a **Dale Carnegie public-speaking course** (twice). Today, there’s a new option that can make becoming a better, more confident speaker a lot less scary by using VR technology. For educators, corporate professionals, politicians — even a best man dreading a wedding-night toast — practicing in front of a virtual audience can take the terror out of the real thing.



Programs like Ovation let you choose from a variety of audiences and settings to mimic presenting at a meeting or giving a keynote speech.

Rehearse, review and repeat

The best way to overcome a fear of public speaking is to get up and do it as often as possible, and then learn from your mistakes.

“Repetition is the key to improving your skills,” says Josephine Lee, an award-winning speaker and longtime member of the public speaking and leadership education organization [Toastmasters International](#). “Groups like Toastmasters work because they provide a safe environment to practice, fail, and get constructive feedback.”

VR public speaking programs can offer many of the same benefits, from an immersive experience that feels like standing in front of a crowd, to real-time feedback that lets users recognize and correct mistakes as they practice.

“The conventional wisdom about public speaking is that you should practice a couple of times in front of a mirror or a group of family and friends,” says Jeff Marshall, Chief Executive Officer of [Ovation](#), a public speaking VR software startup. “With VR, you can give speeches over and over and build muscle memory that carries over when you step up in front of a real audience.”

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The psychology of public speaking

The root of most public speaking discomfort is a certain amount of social anxiety. For some people, this fear can trigger debilitating physiological responses like rapid heartbeat, hyperventilation, even dizziness or fainting. These are all potential signs of glossophobia — the clinical term for the fear of public speaking. Practicing through VR can offer a much-needed first step for people seeking help.

Robert Reiner is a clinical psychologist at the Manhattan-based cognitive behavioral therapy clinic **Behavioral Associates**. He uses VR as an **exposure therapy** tool for a wide range of phobias, including fear of public speaking, which he says is one of the most common phobias he sees, alongside a fear of flying.

Exposure therapy works by slowly exposing a person to the situations they fear in a safe, controlled way to help them learn coping skills and build comfort over time. He also simultaneously teaches patients how to work through their feelings of anxiety and panic using controlled breathing techniques and other behaviors.

“VR therapy works on an inoculation model — like how a flu shot teaches the body to fight off a disease,” he says. “The patient knows they’re not actually in front of a real crowd, but the experience still activates a nervous-system response, so they can learn how to control it.”

Reiner says he's seen many patients use VR effectively as part of the process to overcome glossophobia. His patients gradually step up to live practice as they progress through their sessions, and he has helped formerly glossophobic patients give everything from wedding toasts to stand-up comedy routines.



VR technology can also track your body movements, revealing nervous tics or unconscious fidgeting.

New tools for training and therapy

The ability to use VR in this way may sound like something out of science fiction, but VR public speaking programs have actually been available for at least 20 years. The defining change over the last five years was the launch of powerful devices like the [HP Reverb](#) and the Oculus Rift, which made VR accessible, attractive and affordable for the average consumer. Today's VR gaming headsets typically cost between \$400 and \$700.

“The first VR system I used in 1999 cost about \$15,000,” says Reiner. “Today’s systems are not only much cheaper, but they also have better resolution and provide a more immersive experience.”

Most early public speaking VR programs offered a static environment, with the user standing at a pixelated podium looking out over a small crowd of generic virtual audience members. Today, they offer a more detailed, realistic experience, where you can customize everything from the type of room to the presentation tools you’ll use and how members of the audience will respond to your speech.

“When you put on a high-definition headset like a Reverb and look out at a virtual audience, you see a bunch of eyeballs follow you,” Marshall says. “You feel a sense of presence in the venue. It’s like 200 people are really staring back at you.”

Practice makes perfect — or at least more prepared

Programs like Ovation VR also give users the ability to select the format of their speeches to match the environments they plan to speak in, whether that's a boardroom or a ballroom. They can also incorporate slide presentations and note cards, and practice holding a microphone.

“Think about how pilots use a flight simulator — it helps them learn how to fly, refine their skills and stay relevant,” Marshall says. “It's the same with a public-speaking simulator. We want people to give as many practice speeches as possible so they can see their strengths and weaknesses and guide their improvement over time.”

The software also provides active training with real-time feedback around common challenges, like notifications if you move your hands excessively, say too many filler words (like “um” or “actually”), or fail to shift your gaze evenly across the whole audience.

“Every time you give a practice speech, it's all recorded in 3D so you can play back the speech while moving around the room and watching yourself,” Marshall says. “It's amazing how much body language you can read from just your torso, head and hands.”

This body language is recorded through the VR system's headset and controllers. It can show if you're making consistent eye contact with the audience, whether you stand stiff or move around too much, and how you handle equipment like a laser pointer or microphone.



Practice how you'll respond if the audience's attention wanes, or if they're hanging on your every word.

Transforming training at companies and universities

The level of customization and data collection the VR programs provide, and the ability to practice specific situations over and over, are not only helpful for overcoming a fear of public speaking — they can also help seasoned public speakers perfect their skills. That's why programs like those offered by Ovation, **Virtual Speech**, and **Cerevrum** are starting to pop up in university classrooms and corporate training programs around the country.

Cindy Arthur, the coordinator of instructional technology at Carl Sandberg College in Galesburg, Illinois, had been curious about educational uses for VR for years when she read about Ovation.

“I got really excited because I could see right away how it could benefit our students and faculty,” she says. “I started thinking about how we could use it for our public speaking and communication courses, and we have a criminal justice teacher interested in using it to help students present evidence in a courtroom.”

Arthur started practicing her own public speaking with Ovation and was surprised at how much she learned in just a few sessions. “I didn’t realize that I would always look to the left, or how many times I used filler words or how much I would move my hands when I talk,” she says. “By the third session I was already making improvements.”

That ability to focus on your own skills instead of worrying about the eyes staring back at you gives public speakers a controlled, objective, safe way to practice — and the opportunity to look forward to a positive outcome instead of expecting the worst.

“A VR public speaking trainer provides a patient audience that will listen to you practice your speech 50 times in a row,” Marshall says. “And, they’ll give you a standing ovation every time.”