

Assessing individual oral presentations

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Overall focus

The focus of this paper is an examination of issues arising from the assessment of students' individual oral presentations. This interest derives from the fact that we are senior lecturers in the Department of Education, teaching on initial Teacher Education and Early Childhood Studies degree courses.

The ability to present information concisely and clearly is a requirement of the Teacher Training Agency for the acquisition of Qualified Teacher Status (TTA, 2002) and many teacher training courses contain assessment tasks that include presentations. Within the Early Childhood Studies degree course, presentations form part of assessment tasks for a number of modules, the skills of presentation being regarded as essential for the professional development of staff in the field.

The issues

All group members have taken part in assessment of individual presentations and have concerns regarding the assessment of presentations, despite the fact that marking schemes are usually available. A number of questions have arisen. Key questions include:

Are we assessing students' abilities to:

- Research and prepare cogent and stimulating reviews of subject areas demonstrating their knowledge and skills of critical analysis
- Present information to an audience with appropriate use of visual and technical aids
- A combination of the above?

Should account be taken of particular issues that students may face, for instance:

- English is an additional language
- Lack of experience in presenting to a group
- Lack of confidence?

How do we counter our individual biases as assessors (perhaps regarding use of visual aids or assumptions about the student)?

How are all these issues to be taken into account in the assessment criteria?

To explore some of these issues we will consider the advantages and disadvantages of using presentations as a form of assessment.

Why use presentations as a form of assessment?

Presentations provide useful opportunities for students to practice skills, required in their working lives, in a non-threatening environment. Students can also demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of issues and their ability to present information and engage with an audience. Use of audio-visual props can also be practised. In addition, specific competencies can be assessed, for instance the use of information and communication technology.

What are the disadvantages of using presentations as a form of assessment?

From the perspective of the student these may include the stress of presenting information to a public audience and may disadvantage speakers of English as an additional language.

From the perspective of the assessor issues of validity and reliability arise. Are the assessment criteria truly addressing the skills and knowledge being highlighted? Would the same mark be awarded by another tutor or by the same tutor on another occasion? The transient nature of presentations (unless recorded) means that distractions such as the students' voice, appearance and manner may consciously or unconsciously affect judgement. In addition, it can be hard to give full attention to a number of presentations delivered in succession. Boredom is another factor that the assessor may encounter.

Literature review

A review of the literature reveals little on the *assessment* of presentations, and in fact little on presentations, whether individual or group. What literature that does exist tends to focus on guidance about how to give presentations (Brown and Atkins, 1996). Nonetheless, one of the exceptions to this is the work of Race and Brown (1998) who advise assessors to:

Be clear about the purposes of student presentations. For example the main purpose could be to develop students' skills at giving presentations, or could be to cause them to do research and reading to improve their subject knowledge. Usually, several such factors may be involved together. (p.69)

They go on to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using individual presentations as a form of assessment. The stated advantages include clarity about '*whose performance is being assessed*' and the fact that presentations can also be used to assess key skills, for instance, '*...oral communication, the ability to plan and structure material, and perhaps working as a member of a team*'.

They note some of the disadvantages as being similar to those already experienced and noted by group members:

- With large classes, a round of presentations takes a long time.
- Some students find giving presentations very traumatic.
- The evidence is not always permanent (in the case of an appeal being made).
- Presentations cannot be anonymous (therefore difficult to eliminate bias).

Hounsell and McCune (2001) in their paper 'Making the Most of Oral Presentations by Undergraduates' highlight a number of factors influencing student performance that should be taken into account by the assessor. These factors include:

'the conditions under which the presentations are made (physical setting and layout, the approach taken to questions and comments, ground-rules and etiquette); the stratagems the students deploy to communicate their material effectively to their audiences; the impact of the experiences of listening and presenting; and the role of pre-presentation guidance and post-presentation feedback ' (p1)

Brown *et al* (1997) also review the range of criteria that can be used to assess presentations. They suggest that a simple 4 or 6 point rating scale may be useful. Criteria may include:

- Structure of presentation
- Clarity of presentation
- Enthusiasm of presenter
- Interest of presentation

They also give examples of longer checklists, each scale combines assessment of elements of *performance*, for example, fluency and engagement with the audience and also *content*, therefore focusing on clarity of argument and use of evidence.

Brown *et al* (*ibid*) also stress both the importance of sharing the criteria with students before preparation of the presentation and the importance of providing feedback on performance rather than just a grade. This they argue, enables students to *'feel secure enough to take risks'* and so improve their performance in subsequent presentations.

Current practice

From our experience of the assessment of individual presentations for the Early Childhood Studies Scheme, criteria are set and met through descriptive evidence. Criteria increase in complexity as students' progress through the degree, as evident in the following criteria.

Preliminary Level criteria

- Information given is relevant to the brief and is clearly structured
- Evidence of preparation, some reference and reflection
- Equitable contribution to the group (group presentations only)

Intermediate level

- Management of the time boundary
- Information given is relevant to the brief and is clearly structured
- Evidence of preparation, reference and reflection, some critical thought and objectivity
- Takes initiative but does not dominate the discussion (group presentations only)

Final level

- Management of time boundary
- Material is delivered with appropriate use of visual materials
- Information given is relevant to the brief and is clearly and logically structured
- Evidence of preparation, reference and reflection, some critical thought and objectivity
- Maintains a clear role within the group (group presentations only)

To ensure reliability and validity, two assessors work together to observe the presentations and are required to note evidence of how students meet each criterion. After the presentations there is space on the assessment sheet for more general comments to be made. Finally, the two assessors confer and agree a mark. Ultimately, the students are given a copy of the assessment sheet with comments and a mark included.

Solutions

In light of the above review, the following strategies may be helpful for those considering the issues arising from marking individual oral presentations.

- Assessment and marking criteria should explicitly state the emphasis being placed on content versus performance.
- Where and when possible an additional marker marks all or a sample of presentations.
- The layout of the space and rules for presentations should be discussed and agreed beforehand.
- Students should be given opportunities to practice and to receive formative feedback on their presentation skills before summative assessment takes place, and should be given feedback, not just a mark, after presentations are made.
- When and where possible, presentations should be recorded for future reference.
- Students with English as an additional language should be recognised for their skills in presenting information in an additional language.

Conclusions

Our conclusions are that presentations are a useful and relevant form of assessment. The ability to present information is essential in almost all working environments. However, marking criteria need to specifically address which aspects of the presentation are being assessed.

If we consider organisational and national priorities in relation to widening participation, presentations can be a fruitful medium for some students who are initially more confident in their oral rather than their written skills. University data indicates that presentations are not used uniformly across the whole institution and that some departments such as Education are more likely to utilise this assessment method. Whilst we acknowledge the difficulties of accurate assessment and ensuring reliability and validity, we believe that the abilities intrinsic to oral presentations are important as part of a repertoire of life skills. The University may thus find it useful to investigate university-wide application of this assessment measure and in order to address issues of consistency in the assessment of individual oral presentations.

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Biographical note

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