

## Oral Presentations in Higher Education: key issues

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### Introduction

The use of oral presentations as an assessment instrument has been heavily criticised from as far back as 1936 (Hartog and Rhodes cited in Ahmed 1999). However they are currently enjoying a resurgence due to today's constraints on marking time and the current fashion for developing employability-enhancing transferable skills (Avery and Bryan, 2001).

The fact that oral presentations avoid some of the problems raised by internet plagiarism (Cassidy 2004) has also contributed to their rise. In the day and age where customised essays can be purchased at websites (for example, [www.ukessays.com](http://www.ukessays.com); £70 per 500 words) tutors need assessment instruments that are relatively cheat-proof.

This paper integrates theory and the author's personal experiences to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of oral presentations in relation to the key issues of:

- marking presentation skills vs. marking content
- effectively moderating orals
- assessment design (including feedback, marking, and the use of group work) and
- developing transferable skills vs. facilitating deep learning

### Marking Presentation Skills vs Marking Content

One of the hot issues regarding the use of oral presentations in higher education is whether or not one should be marking the students' presentation skills in addition to marking the content of their presentation. Brown et al (1997) feel that orals test a students communication skills - specifically a students capacity to "think quickly under pressure" and their ability to orally structure information. But should academics be marking such communication skills?

The argument goes that if we are not teaching students presentation skills and if improved presentation skills aren't part of a module's learning outcomes, then we should not be assessing such skills - only presentation content. Conversely though, if written coursework is partially graded on the basis of writing skills (which are unlikely to be part of many modules' curricula or learning outcomes), then perhaps we should be assessing presentation skills.

In the author's view, a balance between assessing content and assessing skills ought to be found and that may be determined by considering a) a module's learning objectives, b) its assessment criteria and c) the subject context.

In some subject areas, graduates will require strong oral skills in the workplace, in which case an emphasis on assessing presentations skills (not just content) seems justifiable. In the music and media industries where one's ability to 'schmooze' and to 'pitch' projects is paramount, there is a

great need for graduates to have highly developed oral communication abilities. For other fields where work is of a solitary and/or mathematical nature (e.g. computer programming), contact time spent on developing oral skills may be considered superfluous.

### **Effective Moderation of Oral Presentations**

The immediate nature of oral presentations may create difficulties for moderation - both in second marking and external examination. In the latter, difficulties have been experienced in the author's subject area at Buckingham Chilterns University College (BCUC).

External examiner comments led to BCUC instigating a policy for presentations to be video taped and for hard copies of visuals to be submitted for moderation purposes. Such videotaping of presentations is also standard practice at many other institutions, worldwide.

However, the author has found students to be rather unconcerned about the moderation and 'fairness' of presentation grades. With orals, students see each other's work and resultantly have a strong comparative understanding of their own grade - unlike with essays where in many cases the mid range students may have no concrete vision of what constitutes a failing essay nor what constitutes one in the top class.

### **Assessment Design**

Oral presentations also pose numerous design issues in terms of feedback, marking, and group assessment.

#### *Feedback*

Brown et al (1997) point out that in oral presentations, feedback can easily be gathered from tutors, peers, plus the presenting student.

While there may often be communication breakdowns when giving feedback to students on written assessments, such problems are easily avoided with oral presentations due to the immediate face-to-face nature of the feedback (Paxton, 1995). However Paxton warns that too often feedback on presentations focuses on delivery skills while ignoring content - a problem which similarly occurs with written coursework where comments may focus on writing skills instead of content.

#### *Marking*

The marking of oral presentations is fast and suits the teaching environment of today where staff time is squeezed tight (Brown et al 1997). However the knock-on effect of this may be a reduction in the quality of contact time; with orals, precious contact time gets spent on assessing rather than on tutoring.

The grading of such presentations brings up issues of instructor bias and academic judgement. At a time when there is a drive towards anonymous marking of assessments, this instrument bucks the trend as the student is literally in the instructor's face. Bias for or against individual students may come out subconsciously in grading. Also, academic judgement may become clouded by students who are able use highly evolved presentation skills to mask a lack of content.

Yet, the ease with which orals facilitate peer assessment makes them attractive since they avoid the administration of copying and circulating student papers in order to gain peer assessment.

## *Group Work*

Given contact time limitations, it's becoming common practice for presentations to be done in groups rather than individually. Depending on the number of students in a group, the amount of class time lost on presentations is reduced by three, four, or even five times through the use of group work.

However, there are often complaints about non-contributing students and the 'unfairness' of all group members receiving the same presentation grade. This makes it a necessity for group grievance procedures to be carefully designed and communicated. The author is currently experimenting with a system of 'yellow cards' and 'red cards' that is being practiced by his colleagues. Under this system, students award under performing group members with a yellow warning card and should they not improve they're given a red card which triggers a 10% grade reduction for the individual.

## **Transferable Skills vs Deep Learning**

Along with the current HE push for emphasising employability in curricula comes a push for developing transferable skills in graduates. Very few work situations draw upon exam writing skills, yet many work situations draw upon the sort of communication skills that are developed through oral presentations - hence such skills may be said to be transferable.

In the author's experience, oral presentations do not enable a student to demonstrate deep learning nor do they facilitate it. The previously mentioned contact time constraints around oral presentations mean that they are usually of only ten to fifteen minutes duration - in which time numerous learning outcomes must often be covered. Students are unable to elaborate in depth on each learning objective and still clock in on time, hence orals often deprive students of deep learning opportunities..

This problem of the depth of a student's learning can be reduced through effective modular assessment design. If a module requires a student to complete an essay on the same topic as their presentation, transferable oral skills can be picked up while stimulating deep learning via the supplementary written submission.

Additionally 'question & answer' sessions following presentations can be used as a forum for tutors to probe students' understanding of what's been presented. Obviously though, if the students' responses to tutor questions are to be factored into the grading, this should be made clear in the assessment criteria and marking scheme.

## **Suggestions For Practice**

There are numerous benefits to using oral presentations. It is undeniable that students stand to benefit from heightened oral communication skills. As an instrument, orals are relatively plagiarism free. Their marking is fast. The nature of their delivery easily facilitates peer assessment.

But there are also drawbacks: effective design is difficult and copious time must be spent on developing and outlining things like group grievance procedures and marking schemes. The depth of learning that occurs with orals is questionable. What should be tutor-student contact time becomes assessment time. They must often be administered as group assessments, and group assessments lead to numerous student grievances.

If one is to use oral presentations in higher education then it is recommended that one pay close attention to assessment design. The balance of presentation skills and content marks should be

determined in relation to both the module's goals and the subject context. A verifiable record of the presentation should be created/kept for moderation purposes - either by means of students submitting visuals, or by video recording. Both feedback and marking must be done in a manner which reduces opportunities for instructor bias. To facilitate deep learning, it is suggested that where possible oral presentations be tied to the submission of an individual essay. Administering oral presentations as group work should help reduce the impact on the quality of tutor-student contact time. However if being done as group work, explicit criteria for dealing with grievances should be specified.

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