

From The Horse's Mouth: oral assessment in Journalism education

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Introduction

“Unlike school education, where the reform of assessment systems has been seen as a key factor in bringing about improvements in student learning, much of higher education has tended to plod along, seeming to take the traditional forms of assessment as a given.” Murphy (2006)

Viva voces and practical oral assessments have been a recognised method of student assessment, in widely diverse academic fields for decades and perhaps even longer (Huxham et al., 2012), however, such assessment methods have not, hitherto, been utilised in the university's Journalism education programme. This is, perhaps, somewhat surprising given that Journalism is, by its very nature, a professional discipline that employs a variety of sensory modalities – extended through technological media - to achieve its effects and impact.

This article will examine why this variety seems not to be reflected in the assessment regimes of associated journalism education programmes and will also raise the following questions:- is this simply a preference that may need to be challenged, and, more provocatively, does it therefore suggest a lack of desire amongst Journalism educators to innovate?

For the purpose of this examination, I will be examining the Journalism School in the university and, more specifically, the undergraduate programme of that school. One of the prime operational principles of the university is that teachers are alert to the changing landscape of university and the role of assessment within it and that therefore, to neglect that changing landscape is unprofessional (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). With a journalism programme in its infancy - at just over three years old - London Metropolitan is in a better position than most universities to deploy a range of assessment techniques in order to make this a professional programme that is both fit for purpose and one which operates to the long-term benefit of its journalism students. As Brown et al (1997) argue:-

“Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and then as

graduates...If you want to change student learning then change the methods of assessment.”

But what do we have now? London Metropolitan is attempting to be a progressive university in terms of its journalism education practices but while multimedia journalism *is* being taught, there is still an overall approach to assessment in the subject - written assignments, blogs and examinations for example - that appears to be strongly skewed to the needs of print journalism. That seems to be, on the whole – at least if measured by assessment regimes - the field for which our graduates are being groomed almost by default. Perhaps it is simply that it is difficult for us, as ‘higher educators’, to change what we do; to change our assessment ‘habits’. Of course, while there is a strong desire (and requirement) to shape our journalists into candidates worthy of the small number of jobs out in the marketplace, we must be mindful of maintaining robust academic standards and not simply changing for change’s sake. As Murphy (2006) puts it:

“There is a fine line that can be drawn between elite educators maintaining tried and tested methods because of years of successful experience and the same people being seen [perhaps] to be arrogantly ignoring new knowledge and experience because of a lack of respect for modern ideas and evidence of success arising from different settings.”

What is interesting, though, is that in a 2007 study of 317 papers on innovative assessment, only four mention oral assessment (Huxham et al., 2012). Again, there is no direct evidence to suggest oral assessment would more beneficial to the London Metropolitan journalism department, other than a small amount of formative student presentations not for marking in class. These cannot be counted as a success or failure whatever their outcome but it begs the question: how do we go about gathering evidence for the efficacy of oral assessment in this context.? One quick response might be to ask “how do we assess now”? The answer to that is that the course primarily utilises pieces of written journalism as assessment items – both short and long-form, as well as academic essays in specifically didactic modules. There are no examinations involved.

Building on research carried out by Gibbs, Habeshaw and Habeshaw (1988), Brown et al (1997) concluded that oral assessments:

“Test communication, understanding, capacity to think quickly under pressure and knowledge of procedures. Feedback potential. Marking for grading can be fast but some standardization of interview procedure is needed.”

Joughin (1999) goes further, outlining six dimensions of oral assessment: content, interaction, authenticity, structure, assessors and orality - some of these will be discussed in more detail later. But these superficially simple, yet ultimately complex, dimensions seem to reflect precisely what we are trying to achieve when assessing in the London Met journalism course. Clearly, these dimensions are not, by any means, the “be-all and end-all” of oral assessment but they do provide us with a

form of template against which oral assessment(s) might be formulated and utilised. It is certainly possible that other issues arising from oral assessment such as its reliability, fairness and cost might be positively illuminated by examining that list (Joughin, op cit).

To target perhaps, the most important reason why oral assessment may be beneficial to journalism, we should return to a key aspect. Journalism is considered to be a vocational subject and, as such, the need for what Joughin describes as authenticity is essential. Authentic assessment describes the extent to which it echoes real-life scenarios - the kind of positions in which graduates will find themselves once they leave university (Joughin, op cit). The importance of this employability “directive” to journalism cannot be overestimated. Firstly, print journalists need to be able to “pitch” and support their ideas in editorial conferences or meetings. It means that the person doing the pitching must have a deep understanding of the story they are describing and the oral fluency with which to narrate it. This is the kind of performance skill that could be tested by oral presentations (Brown, 1999)

The University wants to encourage all students to take a deep approach to learning (Ramsden, 2003). Mounting an engaged attack and focus on assessment and how it caters to the needs of the students might directly affect how they ultimately choose to study (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Joughin (1999) similarly argues in one of his six dimensions of oral assessment that:

“Each student perceived a greater need to understand the material they were studying when preparing for oral rather than written forms of assessment.”

By encouraging this deep learning, we are, at the same time, encouraging them out of simply parroting facts – something that is clearly not the goal of journalism studies – and transforming and appropriating the things they have learned in order to create their own organisational, professional and creative systems (Joughin, 1999).

Print journalism is now not the only route for a graduate to take. At London Metropolitan, students currently study modules entitled Multimedia News Journalism, Audio Journalism and Introduction To Video Journalism. Within these elements, they are taught skills relating to the field, notably that of broadcast journalism, radio programmes, on-camera techniques etc. It might be better – certainly more authentic - to undertake assessment within these modules by means of an oral assessment of some kind? By using speech, people are often able to convey what they are thinking better than by writing. Huxham et al (op cit). argues:

“The idea that speech reflects and creates the person more accurately and fully than writing has been developed more recently...Related to these ideas is the pervasive and important notion that higher education at its best consists of dialogue and learning conversation.”

and it is also much harder harder to plagiarise others' work when assessment takes an oral form (Huxham et al. *op cit*).

This may be self-evident but it doesn't specifically address whether a broadcast – and thus vocally-led – assignment might be better assessed with the aid of a written accompaniment. And while we may be keen to ensure London Metropolitan journalism students are multi-skilled and assessed “authentically”, it is unclear whether the difference in media **necessitates** a different form of assessment. Indeed, could a broadcast assignment – whether a piece of video or audio journalism – be in and of itself considered an oral assessment?

However, potential problems could arise in trying to break down the barriers to innovative assessment – there may even be potential solutions because it is necessary for tutors to assess students' written skills as even broadcast journalists need to be able to write scripts, construct running orders etc.

An increase in multi-culturalism and rise in diagnosed learning difficulties means that journalism educators face some tough challenges, especially when the University Assessment Framework (2010) states:

“Equity in assessment requires that all students enjoy an equal opportunity to display their learning through a diversity of assessment formats wherever possible, recognising that students will have individual differences in prior education, language, age or disability etc.”

It is clear that different styles or types of assessment will be preferred by different students as everyone has their strengths and weaknesses (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). But is that a valid reason for deciding forms of assessment in journalism? Giving an oral presentation may be perceived by some as relatively easy (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997) and some dyslexic students or those whose written English – where English may be their second, third or even fourth, language - might prefer oral assessments (Huxham et al.) Yet others will prefer the more anonymous nature of a written exam and hate the idea of talking through their idea (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007).

There also remain, too, many variables that might affect whether oral assessment would work across the board within the department – variables that need some definitive research. The fundamental issue overriding any possibility of change is the lack of standardisation in the marking. Consistency of marking in assessments is pivotal to the success of London Metropolitan University (Assessment Framework, 2010) and there is a suggestion that oral assessments could be open to bias, since anonymous marking is obviously impossible (Huxham et al., 2012). This is something that would need to be resolved before moving forward and would be difficult. One method could be that the invigilators assessing the students were unfamiliar with them, possibly from a different department. This again throws up all kinds of challenges. Also, as student numbers rise and small staff numbers mean a greater

workload, the requirements for what shifting to oral assessment would entail needs to be examined as well. Perhaps the most pressing issue is rehearsal. It's imperative we prepare students for assessment of any kind, but especially if we adopt a new proposal. Says Bloxham and Boyd (2007):

“Much good work in improving assessment practice will be undermined if we do not put similar effort into preparing students for assessment and help them perceive the meaning of assessments and the standards expected of them.”

This could be seen as a positive or a negative. Positive because it would mean a close engagement with students, extra contact time and feedback for them, as well as instilling a belief that their assessments matter to us. The negative is that with higher student numbers and limited office hours, this would be difficult to manage. It would put a strain on tutors' time and could potentially eat up time in class if we chose to do it then. When time came to actually do the oral assessment however, the first part of the discussion, which is usually spent building a rapport with the student in order to put them at ease and therefore create the best position for them to do well, would already have been carried out, since the preparation time would have established that necessary relationship (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997). It would also be crucial since students require guidance if they are to have success. There can be a tendency by students to be overly pessimistic about their own skills if they feel unprepared (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997). If we were to adopt a new assessment strategy, then there needs to be low stakes opportunities for students to familiarise themselves with what they have to do (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Ultimately, it's not hard to see where the problems might be should there be a more seismic shift across the course to oral assessments.

However, there could be a middle ground. Oral assessments can be determined via a vast range of orality. That is how much is there actually within the assessment that requires an oral element (Joughin, 1999). Semester B 2011/12 will see the students of HJ1003N (Beginning Online Journalism) writing a blog over several classes and then giving a presentation on it in week 7. Further to that, they will have to give peer reviews on each other's work two weeks later. As of now, the blog is what is being assessed as their first assignment, not the presentation, though that is theoretically being fed, rather haphazardly, into the oral contribution mark. One possible solution could be weighting both the blog-writing itself AND the presentation as all part of the first assignment. Not only would this test the students' written and oral skills, but it would be authentic – pitching as in real-life – increase deeper learning – making them take a closer look at the material they have posted online – and they also would or should feel comfortable with the articles they are discussing, since they did it themselves on their own. This would echo a test carried out and discussed by Bloxham and Boyd (2007):

“A third-year module in youth social policy was structured in the form of a series of formal debates on controversial issues in U.K. policy for young people...the students gained the majority of their marks for an individual speech for or against one of the debate motions.”

However, they also received marks in this case for a companion piece of written material. This is an approach that may be favoured by the London Met journalism department. In HJ3007N (Introduction to Video Journalism), for which I am module leader, there is no direct oral component to the assignments. However, they will be required to submit a piece of broadcast journalism that they have previously discussed and ruminated on with their classmates in teams. As such, they will have had to pitch it intra-group, again utilising a small degree of orality. If this could be harnessed into something that was feasible to assess, it could be another option. As of now, the latter is unstructured discussion in an improvised environment which would not be satisfactory to provide an accurate summation of their abilities (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997). To ensure the suitability of an oral assessment strategy, it would be necessary to build a proper assessment plan before proceeding, as demonstrated by Bloxham and Boyd (2007, p177):

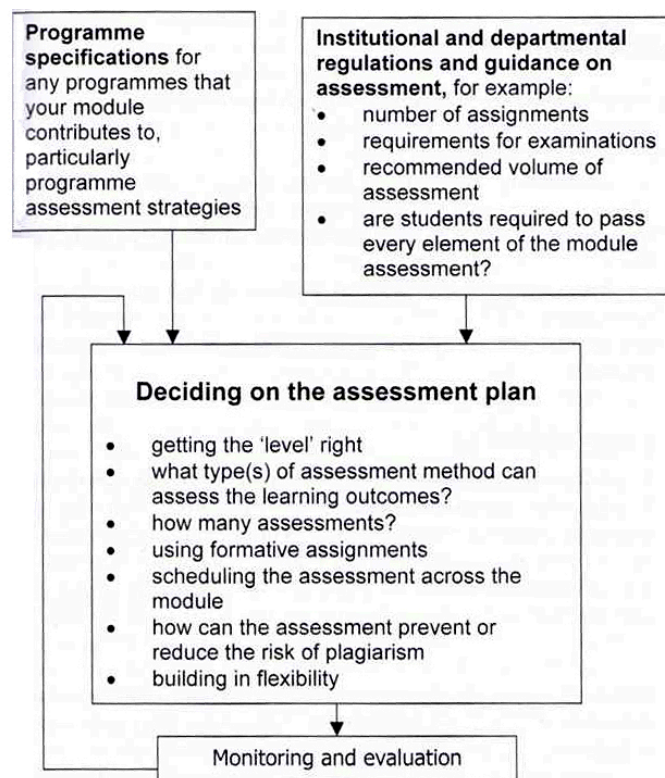


Figure 12.1 Designing a module assessment plan

Only then would it be feasible to proceed.

Assessment continues to be a tricky hurdle to resolve, especially in a changing educational environment (Murphy, 2006). The world of London Metropolitan too is

a fluid one, with the management team continually hammering home the need to enhance the student experience. Critically examining the way we assess students can be perceived as the best way to reach that goal (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). But similarly, with the increase in journalism courses at tertiary education institutions throughout the U.K. and abroad, the importance of being seen to stand out from the crowd in order to attract top quality applicants is key. Writes Roger Murphy (2006):

“Assessment arrangements can, first, have a considerable impact upon the way in which educational courses are perceived.”

In other words, if London Met Journalism wants to be seen as flexible and forward-thinking, it could be beneficial to our course as viewed by the general public to shake up assessment practices and consider a more innovative, varied strategy.

Assessment needs to target an array of skills, testing cognition, understanding, knowledge and authenticity (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Taking into account the degree of orality (Joughin, 1999), oral assessments could be one effective method of doing that.

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