



Assessing Oral Presentations

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Introduction

Oral communication skills are now a key part of what any university programme aims to develop in its students. As 'transferable skills' they are generally agreed to be essential for employability (cf. *Pedagogy* 2004), but they are equally essential — as the Subject Benchmark in History explicitly recognises — as subject-specific skills: 'the capacity to sustain a reasoned line of argument in the face of others, to listen, to engage in sustained debate' is at the heart of academic endeavour.

Oral skills are often assessed only formatively. There can be good reasons for this — some of the problems involved in assessing them summatively are discussed below — but this approach runs two risks. Firstly, formative assessment is often much less formal in process and practice than summative assessment, so that students may not receive proper feedback on their performance or explicit, individual advice on how to improve in future. This is especially likely to be the case where oral skills are assumed to be being developed in a unit or programme simply because students are expected to participate in discussion in small seminar groups. Without some kind of framework, however informal, to ensure that all students do actually participate and benefit from the experience, there is an obvious danger that the status quo will be reinforced, as the confident and articulate students continue to practice their communication skills while the rest remain largely silent.

Secondly, and more seriously, it is widely recognised that students are often reluctant to invest much time and effort in activities that do not have a direct impact on their marks; pointing out that they will need such skills in the future careers has rarely provided sufficient motivation for the majority (Murphy 2001). Assessing oral skills summatively, even if only as a minor component of the overall unit assessment, gives a much firmer basis for the claim that our programmes do help to develop students' abilities in this area. There are potentially some additional benefits: the process of assessment and feedback does not involve too much staff time outside scheduled class hours, compared with conventional essays or exams, while improving student skills in this area can have a clear positive impact on the liveliness, relevance and intellectual calibre of class discussions.

Introducing assessed oral skills into units

Clearly, only certain sorts of units will be suitable for this approach. The unit needs to be small enough, and to have a sufficient number of classes, for every student to have the opportunity to give a presentation without crowding out subject content altogether — especially as it is advisable to have several weeks' worth of classes before starting on presentations, to ensure that all the students have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the topic to be able to produce a reasonable presentation. Final year units seem preferable, not only because they are more likely to be seminar-based but also because students should have sufficient confidence in their overall grasp of their subject, if not of the specific topic, to be willing to participate.

Ideally, the student presentations need to be integrated into the structure of the unit, so that students are required to speak on a specified theme, related to the subject of the class, rather than being given a completely free choice of topic. A similar approach, reducing student choice still further but ensuring that the presentation will be relevant to the class, is to get students to make presentations on particular books or articles that are central to the subject under discussion. Either of these approaches reduces the time involved in advising students on their choice of topic and identifying relevant bibliography for them; the lecturer's presentation can then follow on from (and, as necessary, expand, modify and correct) the student presentation, rather than involving a total change of subject. However, this does require the lecturer to be flexible enough to modify his/her presentation on the basis of what has gone before, and it creates a risk of significant disruption when a student misses his/her designated presentation slot because of illness or other cause and it has to be rescheduled. An alternative approach is to set aside classes towards the end of the unit for presentations on a whole range of topics; students are thereby encouraged to revisit issues in the light of subsequent discussions and to reflect on the unit as a whole.

A whole range of decisions needs to be made, according to local circumstances and preferences: the length of the presentation (and how to deal with presenters over-running; the yellow ['5 minutes to go'] and red card ['stop now!'] system can be used, or time-keeping can be included as one of the assessment criteria); whether to require the use of Powerpoint and

other visual aids (and what to do when the technology doesn't co-operate); whether the department will cover photocopying costs for handouts (not recommended); whether the lecturer should play any part in the discussion or whether it should be left entirely to the presenter to respond to questions and encourage others to speak (this may well depend on whether there will be an opportunity later in the class to correct serious inaccuracies in a way that does not simply come across as criticism of the presenter).

Assessment and Quality Assurance

It is clearly essential that students are given clear guidance on what is expected of them: general advice on what makes a good presentation (encouraging them to reflect on the different styles of presentation they have experienced in previous units), marking criteria specific to this form of assessment (see **Appendix 1** for an example of such criteria, and **Appendix 2** for an example of a pro-forma feedback sheet), and statements of any particular expectations (e.g. whether the use of Powerpoint is required; clearly this depends on the availability and reliability of the equipment). The key decision for departments will be how to frame and weight different criteria; how far should a student be given credit for knowledge and understanding if their presentation skills are terrible and they fail to respond properly to questions? A decision will also need to be made as to how the presentation should relate to the rest of the assessment for the unit; it could be deliberately designed as preparation for a later essay (in which case the bulk of the marks should be given for presentation skills, not content) or kept entirely separate, so that students are warned to avoid any duplication of material in later assessment.

Perhaps the main reason why presentations are rarely assessed summatively is the question of quality assurance: how can a moderator or external examiner offer any useful judgement on the appropriateness of a particular mark, since they were not present at the presentation and so cannot assess its quality? Students have, in my experience, been adamantly opposed to any suggestion that their performance should be recorded, whether on audio or video; but this would be one way of keeping a record that could be reviewed at a later date, if resources allow. Certainly some sort of record needs to be kept; as well as a copy of the feedback sheet, the marker should take detailed notes, and the student should be asked to provide a copy of the presentation (in note form if that was how it was delivered) and any other relevant material.

In co-taught units, the issue does not seem too serious: the lecturers both attend the presentations, take separate notes and then agree a mark afterwards. In a unit taught by a single lecturer, this is clearly more problematic; it would not be a sensible use of staff time for a second marker to be brought in for every presentation. A 'sampling' approach, with a colleague attending one or more presentations as an observer, would work well as a means of reviewing the lecturer's

assessment practices (and could be incorporated into an existing peer observation system). Where a lecturer was assessing presentations for the first time, the moderator can attend the first one, discuss it with the lecturer and give advice that should influence the way that subsequent presentations are then assessed. For more experienced staff, a single observation in the course of the unit should be sufficient.

What this approach does not do, however, is offer a sound basis for adjusting any of the actual marks awarded. Whereas a moderator can adopt a deliberate sampling strategy, reviewing all borderline cases and/or outlying marks, the observer can comment properly only on the mark for the presentation that s/he has attended — and it is not recommended that s/he actually does this. Students can be nervous enough in these situations at the best of times; introducing another member of staff into the class, unless it is made absolutely clear that the observer is there to assess the assessor not the presenter, could seriously disadvantage those students whose presentations are observed, and certainly give them grounds for appeal.

Quality assurance of assessment is always a matter of 'appropriateness', taking into account resource issues as well as the nature of the assessment. Where an assessed presentation contributes perhaps one mark out of 20 in the final degree classification, the fact that it cannot be properly reviewed by a moderator or an external examiner seems to be clearly outweighed by the obvious benefits of including it as part of the summative assessment — provided that the assessment process, as opposed to the individual marks, is properly monitored, including the use of agreed marking criteria that are made available to students as well as staff.

Training and practice

Increasingly, University Careers Services and other sources of student skills training offer workshops on presentation skills; the department simply needs to ensure that students know of these and are encouraged to attend them. However, it is obviously good practice for students to have an opportunity to try out a new form of assessment and receive feedback on their performance in the context of their subject before they have to do it 'for real'.

This will rarely be possible within the unit where they will be summatively assessed on these skills, unless the number of students is very small indeed; rather, opportunities for practice need to be incorporated into the programme elsewhere. This is not always easy. In a class of thirty, let alone of fifty or more, there is clearly insufficient time for every student to make a presentation to the rest, and all too often any discussion tends to involve the same few students. If the unit has parallel seminars or tutorials, those provide an obvious opportunity for presentation practice and feedback, but I have experimented this year with an approach, based largely on student peer assessment, that allows this even within large lecture groups.

Within two core skills-focused units in the Bristol ancient history programme, one first- and one second-year unit, particular classes were designated for presentation practice. The students were put into groups of about six, and allocated roles: the speaker, who had to give a presentation on a subject of his/her choice within the overall theme of the unit and respond to questions afterwards; the chair, who had to sum up the presentation and then orchestrate the discussion; the audience members, each of whom had to ask at least one relevant question; the rapporteur, who had to produce a written summary at the end and submit it to the lecturer. The groups were told to discuss the content of the presentation and the issues raised by it for five to ten minutes, then switch to discussing the presentation itself, drawing in particular on the standard departmental marking criteria for assessed presentations. The guidance given to the students can be seen at **Appendix 3**. Allowing time for groups to organise themselves, a fifty-minute class gave enough time for two such sessions. The lecturer would wander from group to group (though in the event I was unable to attend one of the classes; the fact that the students could be left to get on with their designated tasks saved the need to rearrange the session).

Besides offering some students the opportunity to practice their presentation skills and to start to 'assimilate' the criteria that would be used to assess them, my main hope was that this exercise would emphasise that it could be equally challenging and important to be a 'good audience'. From the reports of the rapporteurs, and comments made by students in their reflective journals (part of the assessment for the units), this was at least partially successful; at any rate, a number noted the importance of the audience as well as the speaker being prepared. Whether this conditions their behaviour in future years remains to be seen. Most of those who commented felt that the exercise had helped them to understand what was involved in a good presentation (interestingly, they were divided as to whether it was more productive to be a presenter or an audience member); many felt that the size of the group was an advantage, as they felt more comfortable in speaking out — with some saying that they would now feel more confident in speaking out even in a normal class. One further advantage, which hadn't occurred to me but which many first year students emphasised, was the way that the exercise had helped them get to know their fellows.

'An excellent way to make sure that no one could get away with not having an opinion.'

'It was interesting having to consider not only the style and content of the talk itself but also the way in which it should be presented. The opening of a discussion is crucial and must challenge people's view and provoke thoughts so they automatically produce questions. The presentation in general is a completely different medium to the essay.'

'It was a good change from lectures as the class really had to work together and interact.'

'Definitely a very necessary lesson to be learned and something that should be used a lot more in class.'

The few negative comments came from students who felt that others in their group had done insufficient work; this can be seen as a useful lesson in the medium term, but it does come at the expense of putting them through a frustrating, apparently unproductive experience.

The main constraint, apart from the inevitable risk of students not turning up due to illness, was the nature of the learning space. Ideally, this exercise needs quite a lot of room, with flexible seating arrangements; I am not sure it would work well in a really traditional lecture theatre. One possibility would be to allow the groups to make their own arrangements, but this would seem to create a greater likelihood of absenteeism on the part of the audience. Relying on self-policing through peer pressure might be more realistic for second years who already know one another than for first years, but it probably still has limited effectiveness when there are no marks involved. More optimistically, however, the class which I was unable to attend actually seems to have gone better than the one I observed; as one (mature) student put it:

'I have to admit that I did not think today's class would be a very successful one; I thought that leaving a room of first year students together, unsupervised and with minimal guidance, wouldn't work, but I was surprised to find that it did work, and very well at that.'

References

Murphy, R. (2001) 'A briefing on key skills in higher education' (*LTSN Generic Centre Assessment Series No. 5*):

www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record§ion=generic&id=5

Pedagogy (2004) = Pedagogy for Employability Group, 'Pedagogy for Employability':

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