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Poster Presentation:An effective assessment for large communication classes?

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Abstract: - This paper sums up the results of action research conducted by the author to evaluate the efficacy of using Poster Presentations as an assignment for a large communication class. The increase in class sizes, even in communication courses, had prompted a rethink of the current assessment methods. For the first time in the university posters were used as a means of assessing students' work. The lecturer conducted descriptive research to assess the feasibility of repeating the assessment in future communication courses. A survey consisting of a sample of 25% of the population was conducted along with several informal interviews. The results show overwhelming support for using Posters as an assessment method.

Key-Words: - communication course; large classes; innovative assignment; poster presentation; action research

1 Introduction

The democratisation of education in the past decades has led to an increase in student numbers in most institutions of higher education. Educators have had to adopt new practices to facilitate the teaching and learning process without compromising quality. The following paper evaluates the use of Poster Presentation as an assignment in a large communication class in an off shore campus of an Australian university. The campus located in the Middle East hosts students from over a 100 countries. The subject considered here is an elective – Business Communication - offered to students from different majors and levels. The class therefore has a heterogeneous population with mixed skill levels and learning backgrounds. The current practice is to assess students using group oral presentations. However, the lecturer found this assessment lacking as it did not stimulate audience participation or deep learning. The involvement of the presenters themselves was also minimal. It was therefore deemed necessary to try out a new assessment method.

2 Problem Formulation

2.1 Limitations of group oral presentations

Assessing the communication skills of large classes poses several challenges to faculty. In large classes grading individual work is time consuming and therefore teachers resort to group work, multiple choice questions etc. As Biggs [1] points out "if lecturing is the default for large-class teaching, MC's and time exams are the default for large-class assessment." However, these assessment methods do not evaluate all aspects of a student's learning.

The average class size for the Business Communication course is about 200 in the lectures and 40 in the tutorials. The large class sizes make it difficult to assess individually in the tutorials and hence group oral presentations are the norm. Group work is a much studied and debated

assessment format which has many merits as well as demerits [2]. Individual assessments helps to overcome many of the demerits of group work like free riding, unequal distribution of work, disagreement among group members etc. Previous research and experience highlighted several limitations of using group oral presentations as an assessment in communication classes. The multiplicity of oral presentations in most courses definitely boosted students' confidence to speak in public but was accompanied by an inefficient learning process. This has been mentioned in previous research by the author. "The average student seemed to have imbibed a surface approach to preparing for presentations where they by-hearted a 5 minute speech and delivered it to a bored class. When the student was not a skilled presenter the class was losing out on valuable teaching/learning time as Oral presentations are held in tutorials" [3].

2.2 Inadequate speaking practice

In a communication course, in particular, it is necessary to give students ample speaking practice. This was not possible in the current scenario where assessments were conducted in the tutorials with 40 students each. The current assessment type of Group oral presentations allowed a maximum of 5 minutes of speech time per student and 2-3 minutes for discussion. The non-presenters were inactive most of the time. Therefore it was deemed necessary to try out an assessment method which would increase the speaking time for each student as well as enable the teacher to evaluate students' individually.

3 Problem Solution

3.1 Using individual assessments

Individual presentations improve the validity of an assessment as it is easier to gauge the performance of students individually. As Dunn et al [4] point out "an assessment task is considered to be valid if it permits a student's performance, on what has actually been taught, to be measured: a task would be valid if it measures what the teacher intended it to measure." Individual assessments are necessary to evaluate the efficacy of a course as well as the progress of students enrolled in the course [5]. In a communication course individual assessments would also help to overcome the issue of limited speaking practice caused by group oral presentations.

3.2 Poster presentation- advantages

The instructor decided to use an innovative assessment – the poster presentation – to overcome the problems posed by group oral presentations discussed above. The poster presentation among other merits was expected to

1) Increase quantity and quality of speaking time
2) Improve class participation
3) Permit individual assessment in a large class
4) Encourage deep learning and
5) Offer immediate feedback to students.

The merits of poster presentation are many. It encourages higher order learning and as John Biggs [6] comments "the most likely kind of learning assessed by posters is concentrating on relevance and application." While evaluating the use of poster sessions as an alternative to term papers by a geology instructor Farber and Penhale [7] cite three reasons for the choice of poster sessions. Firstly it "allow[s] instructors to avoid reading/grading students"; secondly it permits "students to work collaboratively in groups" and thirdly the various merits suggested in an article by Kemp and Clark. Kemp and Clark list many advantages of the uses of posters including student motivation generated by an innovative assignment, peer learning, posters being less threatening than formal presentations, and the interaction between faculty and students during the sessions resulting in better evaluations.

Another major merit is that students cannot by-heart material to be presented as in oral presentations. Students were asked to respond to questions posed by viewers and not give a summary of the whole

poster. Mark Firth [8] identifies this as a major merit. Firth also points out the increase in speaking time in the poster format. "... their [students'] presentation progressively improves because they are presenting numerous times."

Other practitioners like Akister et al [9] also support the use of posters as an assignment. They write "the poster offers a visual presentation of a piece of work and gives cues that allows those viewing the poster to seek dialogue on areas of interest to them. There is opportunity for direct discussion and exchange of ideas with the presenter."

3.3 The format of the poster presentation assignment

The drawbacks of using group oral presentations to assess first year Business Communication students lead to the introduction of an innovative assessment- the poster presentation. Some students had worked on posters before but for many it was a totally new experience. It was therefore important to familiarise students with the format of the assessment. In the first tutorial students were given extensive information about the organisation, content, topics, presentation and other factors related to the assessment. A sample poster sheet in the dimensions recommended was presented to the class. Information on the poster presentation assessment was provided in the subject outline as well as in handouts. Links to online material on poster development and presentation were also included. The poster presentations were scheduled to start towards the middle of the 13 week session. In each tutorial 5-7 students were to present posters on different topics related to the course. The posters were to have a clear title that reflected the contents, an introduction, body, conclusion and reference list. Students were instructed to avoid verbosity and to use bullet points wherever possible. This was expected to build their skills in summarising and analysing. This had the benefit of discouraging plagiarism as students could not copy text from outside sources. The use of graphics was encouraged and this ensured that students did not read from the poster while presenting. When assessing using posters Mulnix and Penhale [10] also asked students to present "information in one-phrase summaries and outlines".

The presentation was organised so that it would avoid learning material by rote and also promote deep learning. Students were to put up the posters on a chosen spot on the classroom wall. They were expected to be present near their posters for the next 30 minutes. After this they were to view other posters exhibited. Non presenters could choose to view posters in any sequence. As the poster topics were connected to the course content and covered in the final exam non-participating students were enthusiastic about reading others' posters. The presenters were encouraged to respond to questions from the viewers and not to summarise their presentation for every individual/group viewing their poster. This encouraged interaction and deep understanding and discussion of the topics presented.

The instructor found the poster assessment useful to gauge the level of preparation of the presenters and their understanding of the topics. It was easy to grade students and also to give instant feedback. This would not have been possible in other assessment formats. It took on average 10 minutes to assess a student according to the criteria provided.

Most students took pride in their work and were happy to explain the contents of the poster to their peers. There was some initial resistance to the assessment as it was new and many students feared that they were not creative enough to work on posters effectively. They were reassured that the criteria gave no points for creativity. Some students thought it was very childish to work on posters and it was embarrassing to carry the posters around as it attracted a lot of attention. However as the course progressed student attitudes changed to a more positive one.

In the last lecture of the session selected posters based on grades attained and topics covered were presented to the whole lecture group and to visitors including students from other courses, teaching and administrative staff of the university. Staff

was given the opportunity to choose their favourite poster and the selected posters were given a best poster award. Students proudly displayed their certificates next to their posters. Guests were very appreciative of the poster display session and students enjoyed the experience of presenting their posters to peers and staff of the university. The students gained much exposure from the whole exercise and it was a simulation of what they would do in their future career.

3.4 Descriptive research

An anonymous survey of 25% of students enrolled in the course (N=160) was done to evaluate their responses to the innovative assignment. The questionnaire consisted of 19 ordinal questions on a 4 point Likert scale and one ranking question about the preferred type of assessment. The core areas covered were working on the poster; viewing others posters; presenting the posters and a comparison with other assignments. To questions about working on the poster 80 % of the students agreed that they enjoyed working on the poster; an overwhelming 97% students said they like to work on new types of assignments; 78% said they would like to work on posters again. On their views about viewing others posters 96% said they enjoyed reading others posters; 83% said they learned from others posters; 83% agreed that the topics covered in the posters were interesting; while 94% agreed that the topics were useful; 42% said the number of posters presented in a tutorial should be around 3, while 36% said they would like to see 3-5 posters per tutorial; the rest said they would like to view 5-7 posters per tutorial. In short, an analysis of the survey results show that students enjoyed working on the assessment and benefitted much from it. Walker [11] also reports similar findings "students who opted for a poster presentation ... report enormous satisfaction and feel that the assessment method enhances their learning of the subject."

To the questions about presenting the poster 36% agreed that they were afraid to speak in public, 91% said the one to one speaking in the poster presentation gave them confidence to speak in public. About the discussion session with presenters 89% agreed that presenters handled questions well and gave detailed responses while 64% said they were asked stimulating questions.

In the survey 75% said it was easy to score marks in the poster presentation. An overwhelming 86% said that posters helped them to understand difficult topics; 84% said posters were preferable to oral presentations. For the ranking question which asked students to rank in order of preference the assignment they liked best 54% chose the poster as their preferred assignment.

Farber and Penhale [12] suggest that the poster sessions "not only provides educational benefits, but also elicits enthusiastic participation and positive response from students." Akister et al [13] observe that students "seem to enjoy exploring a different mode of presentation. ... Overall the experience of using this method of assessment has been extremely positive. It seems an efficient way of teaching through assessment and of developing verbal and presentation skills."

Informal interviews with around 20 students were also conducted to analyse their motives, beliefs, attitudes and feelings in relation to the assessment. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. This yielded very supportive feedback. One major observation was that it was a fun assignment to do. Some students also said it was easier than other assignments. Some students felt it was too much work to be done by one student but others responded that working on a poster in a group would be difficult as there would be "too many conflicting ideas."

A student who won a best poster award for a poster on career choices said he felt like he was at an exhibition. "I've been a part of many cooperate exhibitions and it feels great when you exhibit your poster and you get your views from different professors, it tells you how should I improvise on my presentation skills."

The need to work with the information was highlighted during the interviews. One student commented "you cannot put

everything on the poster only the stuff which is appealing to the public and umm you needed to filter a lot of information because it is such a vast topic, you needed to be specific about it, the usage of diagrams was really good because it says more than words." The same student shared the sentiment that the new assessment seemed childish at first. She said "it seemed ridiculous in the beginning that we were doing posters as it was something we did in high school." Another student who also won a best poster award commented that the reason why she would not want to repeat the assignment was "once was enough, ... no because it's kind of embarrassing you know carrying the posters in the university, it really is."

Many students expressed their preference for the poster over the oral presentation. Comments included "but in the end I think you learn more than what we learn in presentation because no one is really paying attention [to a presentation] and here everyone is interested, its visually appealing and that's about it"; "somehow because here I was concentrating on something specific and I actually learned more. I actually learned more to answer your [instructor's] question, I learned more from my posters because in presentations ...umm I just memorize everything more like not necessarily understand what I am saying, so definitely posters [are better]".

One major reason for the preference of posters over oral presentations was that it improved confidence to speak in public. As a student mentioned "I gained bit of little confidence what I didn't have, maybe I thought I couldn't present now I am fine with it, I can do it maybe in the future as well". The poster session helped to increase quantity and quality of speaking time as the instructor expected. The one to one sessions helped students who were afraid of public speaking. Students also mentioned this as part of their experience; "poster presentation is much better because you are talking one to one and you can explain research a lot and you can explain them by putting the pictures and all but then in presentation it's like you have your part. I mean all the group is presenting together so even if you worked for the entire presentation that doesn't show it. I mean you will be credited only for your part. Poster Presentation you can show your individual creativity and you are not limited by let's say software. I feel that this one is ... I mean had much of work rather than just presenting on a power point slide because over there it's just, you just have to enter the data".

Many students agreed that presenting one to one was better than whole class presentations. "One to one was much better because you can actually see if a person is interested or not because in an entire class of students some are interested and some are not. When you are presenting to an entire class it's a bit more daunting when you want to answer and everyone is silent. When there is one to one, one person is actually sincere and up close and personal so it is a little less daunting". Another student shared the same sentiment " I feel that uhh, many of the students they are very nervous presenting in a whole group of audience but when its one to one is like normal talking to a person and you can actually build an emotional bond and present it". Posters also allow peer teaching which as McKeachie et al cited in Biggs opines is an excellent teaching method. "There is no single best method of teaching but students teaching peers is the second best" [14].

Students were also very involved with the assignment; "it was a great experience from starting to end from making your poster till presenting it and explaining it to other people you yourself get a bit more interested and it's not scripted so it is very simple"; "it's much better than presentations; this is more interactive, way more interactive. You get to see one thing in many different ways many people are doing one topic you know different points of views and stuff. You don't have to read from slides or something you just have to talk about more as you want. Yeah and just go on talking you don't care if anyone is listening or not listening, you just know you have to make your slides you have to have your speech ready, you have to present". The poster presentation it can be assumed from the students' comments afforded an interesting learning experience

to students. As Palomba and Banta [15] write "Assessment must be seen as an activity done with and for students, rather than to them. Students need to be active partners in assessment. … If educators are thoughtful about how they include students in the assessment process, they can help overcome motivation problems that hinder assessment." Biggs [16] observation "being active while learning is better than being inactive: activity is a good in itself" supports the involvement of students in the assignment.

Conclusion

Though the poster session was successful in overcoming some of the drawbacks of oral presentations efforts can be made to improve this assessment. In the future it would be feasible to follow what Mulnix and Penhale [17] did during the poster session they organised. A question based on the poster's contents was attached to the poster and these questions were used in the final examination on the course. This would ensure the active participation of students in the poster session.

A major drawback of the poster session is that students feel posters call for a lot of creativity. In the interviews many students raised this concern. Willet et al [18] also make a similar observation, "posters with high ... merit but unattractive appearance risked being overlooked."

It is interesting to note that in a survey of students who participated in a poster session by Moore et al [19] students identified four reasons for the effectiveness of posters "poster design and layout; poster visuals; poster overall aesthetics; poster content". This asserts that many students relate successful posters to creative skills.

In future when the poster assessment is used it would be beneficial to follow Farber and Penhale's [20] idea of asking students to submit a one page summary of another group's poster. Walker [21] observes that while working on posters students "seem to invest the work with a large amount of creative energy and individual flair often missing from assignment production..."

The instructor observed that the poster assignment met the five major requirements it was expected to satisfy at the outset. Therefore it can be used again with improvements.

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