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Innovative Assessment: The Workshop Method

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1 Introduction

Assessment methods are a fundamental part of higher education and any attempt to improve the quality of education should include an evaluation of the methods used in assessing students. It is vital then to constantly reassess methods used in evaluating students' learning to ensure that it not only measures the outcome of learning but is also an aid to effective learning. This paper evaluates the use of Oral Presentations in a Business Communication course and suggests the introduction of the Workshop Method to promote active learning. As Brown (2003:3) observes "...the assessment strategies we use must be a result of conscious decisions based on informed choices." Furthermore, "the single most useful thing we as teachers can do to influence positively the process of teaching and learning is to make the right choices in designing a 'fit-for-purpose' assessment strategy (Brown,2003:4)." The changing nature of education and the diverse array of job skills required for success in every career demands innovation in assessment methods and the designing of 'fit-for-purpose' assessments.

Oral presentations are a common assessment method in most institutions of tertiary education and are used especially when communication skills are tested. Many universities list oral communication skills among their graduate attributes as it is a skill that will boost the saleability of a graduate and also help in promotions once in the job. Oral presentations can be defined as "an address or presentation given verbally to an audience. Many oral presentations include visual aids. Oral presentations can take place in various forms including poster presentations, group work, interviews, and debate (Oral Presentations, 2009)." Oral presentations help to improve not only communication skills but also cognitive, analytical and personal skills which can be transferred to other aspects of learning and career. Gordon Joughin and Gillian Collom (2003) summarise the reasons for assessing students orally.

Authenticity. Since oral communication dominates most fields of professional practice, oral assessment allows students to research, prepare and present findings in a context similar to that of their future work. In addition, oral assessment lends itself readily to group presentations, thereby making it well suited to those group-based assessment tasks that reflect 'real life' teamwork.

Promoting good learning. Many students experience oral assessment as more personal, more challenging, and more engaging than other forms of assessment. In particular, the opportunity in oral assessment to probe understanding through follow-up questions can encourage deep approaches to learning.

Balancing and developing student strengths. Some students will perform better in oral than in written formats. For other students, oral assessment provides an opportunity to develop important oral skills.

Countering plagiarism. The questioning component of oral assessment discourages plagiarism, while a short oral component attached to written work can confirm student authorship.

In the modern day classroom where the main challenges faced by tutors are growing class sizes and the heterogeneity of the students (Koshy, 2008) group oral presentations have helped tutors to assess quickly and reliably and also to provide instant feedback.

2 The need for innovation

The context of this research is the off-shore campus of an Australian University in the Middle East. Students' educational and cultural backgrounds are diverse and the university hosts students from over 100 countries. This unique mix poses several challenges to educators. As an instructor of General Education courses in literacy and study skills offered to freshmen students to familiarise them with assessment methods including Oral Presentation I have the opportunity to evaluate student progress. These students later enrol in Business Communication a 100 level course which teaches and assesses presentation skills among other aspects of communication. Most qualitative subjects have Group Oral Presentation as a major assessment and students would have participated in around 5-20 presentations depending on the year in which they choose to enrol in Business Communication. Over the past 5 years I have graded over 500 student presentations and am convinced that Oral Presentations as an assessment form needs to be evaluated and improved on. It is encouraging to see that students generally improve most aspects of their presentation skills like presentation style including eye contact and body language and overcome stage fright. However analysis and understanding of the topic was lacking in many cases. 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. As the article Evaluating Assessment Strategies(2009) points out, one of the major disadvantages of this assessment method is "time-wasting when work quality is bad or boring." In a class of around 40 students where a group of 5 is presenting 35 bored students waste their time by not participating and engaging in the learning process. Audience participation is vital for the presenter and audience. The students of the Australian Catholic University comment that one of the problems students face in oral assessment is the "inattentive audience" (*Oral assessment: Problems identified by students, 2007*).

Improving audience participation is important in enhancing the value of time spent on presentations. Otherwise a majority of the class is left out of the whole learning process. This becomes a grave issue when tutorials cover material not touched upon in lectures. Most universities structure class delivery around the lecture and tutorial format where, as Biggs (2000:83) explains, "the tutorial is meant to complement the large lecture. In the lecture, the expert delivers the information, the learners are passive. In the tutorial, the students should do much of the work, the tutors role is to see that they do." But ineffective presentations become like boring lectures delivered in tutorials.

To overcome the problems highlighted above the workshop method was introduced in tutorials in Business Communication in Spring 2009. Students were given detailed guidelines about the format as they were new to it. The subject outline delineated the requirements:

> You are required, in small teams of 4-5 people, to run a class workshop on a topic related to Business Communication as shown in the weekly schedule. The workshop should not be 25-30 minutes of "lecture material". Instead, ensure you include activities to keep the class involved, while demonstrating your understanding of relevant business communication concepts. Be creative, and make it interesting! Include debates, role-plays, demonstrations, team games, competitions, videos etc. Ensure the workshop is a well-prepared team-effort, not a collection of separate workshop sections by each group member. Students must also fill out individual confidential reports about their contribution to the workshop. Each member of the group must contribute equally to the preparation and presentation of the workshop. Group members will be awarded marks individually based on their contribution to the preparation and performance during the workshop. Groups have to meet the tutor one week before the workshop is due to discuss their progress.

Workshops can be defined as "a series of educational and work sessions. Small groups of people meet together over a short period of time to concentrate on a defined area of concern (What is a workshop?, 2009)."
Workshops are conducted regularly in diverse topics at various skill levels to provide practical experience to groups of learners. As it incorporates the benefits of team work, learning from peers, practical learning and small group learning it promotes active learning.

Interestingly, the New York City Schools has adopted a curriculum which uses the Workshop Model. This Model is the result of the joint effort of various language schools all over the US. The development of this model lasted over thirty years and it was first introduced in the late 1980's. McFadyen (2005) describes the Workshop Model:

> The model is premised on the belief of "progressive" educators that the best way to encourage deep and enduring understanding is through "discovery learning" in a small-group setting, where students puzzle out problems and acquire knowledge on their own. Accordingly, the teacher must limit direct instruction to the first 7 to 10 minutes of class. For the next 20 minutes, students work in pairs or groups of four to try out the concept or skill that the teacher modeled in the "mini-lesson." During that period, the teacher circulates from group to group helping as needed, or in elementary and middle schools, conducts five-minute "conferences" to assess students individually. For the final 10 minutes of class, the groups share results.

The Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) Workshop Model is a variation of the Workshop Model which is now used by many universities especially in

science and mathematics. In the PLTL Workshop model "students who have done well in the course previously become guides and mentors, *Workshop Peer Leaders*. For the peer leaders, the experience of working with faculty and guiding their peers through a difficult course is rewarding and unforgettable, and can have a profound effect on their individual and professional growth (The Peer-Led Team Learning Workshop Model, 2003)." This model is credited to have improved student performance in academics and other areas. David Goldfarb (2007) of the University of Rochester comments "We think that the Workshop program is an entry point for an extended program of development for our undergraduate, graduate and even postdoctoral students to learn more about leadership and teaching. Future leaders are first identified and encouraged when they are Workshop students." The Workshop Project news letter reported in 2000 that a number of comparison studies have shown that the model has had strong positive effect on student performance (Progressions:Peer - led team learning, 2000). The success of the Peer-Led Team Learning Workshop Model is reassuring and is an encouragement to experiment with the workshop method.

3 Research Method

Quantitative data

A questionnaire was distributed to survey 45 students who had conducted workshops in Business Communication in Spring, 2009. The purpose of the questionnaire was explained and it was anonymous. There was one ranking question. For other questions students had to indicate their response on a five point Likert scale. Some of the data is presented below.

Table 1 – Analysis of questionnaire 1

1. What activity would you like to do in tutorials?	Workshop 41%	Presentation 9%	Solve problems 34%
2. Presentations help to learn the subject matter better than workshops	Strongly agree/ Agree 23%	Disagree/ Strongly disagree 40%	Neutral 37%
3. Workshops are easier to prepare than presentations	36%	47%	17%
4. Workshops are more interesting to prepare than presentations	71%	16%	13%
5. Workshops are more interesting to participate in than presentations	80%	0	20%

The analysis of the above data shows that students have a clear preference for workshops as compared to presentations as 41% ranked it first. They also agreed that workshops helped to learn the subject matter better. However, most students disagreed that workshops were easier to prepare than presentations. This shows that unlike in presentations they had to work more with the material and could not just by-heart chunks from the internet or from their text books. This would suggest that deeper learning takes place. When students prepare for workshops they also have to look for appropriate activities and co-ordinate with group members. Though difficult to prepare 71% agreed that preparing for workshops was interesting. Also, 80% agreed

that workshops were more interesting to participate in than presentations. Interestingly not one of the respondents disagreed with it. This suggests that the problem of lack of audience participation which occurs in lectures can to an extent be solved using the workshop method.

Qualitative Data

A focus group interview of students who had completed the survey was conducted for a summative evaluation of the workshop method and their responses were recorded and transcribed. None of the students had presented workshops before. Students believed that the "interaction and involvement" in the workshop method helped them to learn better. Preparing for workshops was more challenging as they had to "know more than what they were talking about". This suggests they were under pressure to know their material better as they had to conduct and explain activities, discuss solutions to case studies and so on. They observed that not all activities that were used helped them to learn better as some groups used quizzes that did not require much thinking. All of them agreed that preparing for presentations was easier as they did not have to "hunt for activities" and it was easier to divide work in the presentation. These students had not used the resources recommended by the tutor and hence found it difficult to identify appropriate activities. Some students argued that presentations were better as by-hearting material was easier than speaking from cue points

4 Teacher's observation
Workshops are more participative and thus more interesting and productive. They also helped to overcome the boredom caused by poor presentations. It gave students practical experience and the handouts/worksheets could be used for future reference. However, the groups that had not met with the tutor a week in advance to discuss progress and choice of activities often used activities that were inappropriate for the age and skill level of the class. Games were used which did not have any educative value. Many groups spent a lot of time creating activities of their own. Another important observation was the audience were not always willing to take part in activities, especially in the demanding ones. They had to be coaxed by the prospect of gaining class participation points. Groups conducting workshops were unwittingly pressurising the audience by asking them questions individually, and forcing them to take part in role-plays and other activities. Maintaining discipline during group activities was also difficult. A similar observation was made about the Workshop Model. "… it can make it harder for a teacher to keep a class quiet. Group work is essential in Workshop Model yet this can sometimes lead students astray of their work. It is important for teachers to regulate the classroom's work level and make sure that students are on task, but keeping the class quiet adds to the work teachers have to do when they perform Workshop Model (Teacher Preparation, 2009)." The tutor has to be involved in maintaining the discipline of the class as it is unfair to expect students to handle their peers. A marking criteria was provided and as mentioned earlier students were marked individually for the delivery and corporately for the content.

5 Conclusion

The workshop method helps to eliminate many of the drawbacks of Oral Presentations. The learning process is improved for the whole class through active audience participation and hence this model is worth practicing. As Race(2003:57) points out "changing assessment can be justified if the quality of both teaching and learning are improved as a result, and if the assessment itself can be shown to be demonstrably fairer, and better related to the intended learning outcomes." McDowell and Sambell (2003:80) who studied innovative assessments from a student's perspective lay some guidelines for educators involved in innovation. Their suggestions include "consider student workload carefully; take steps to maintain motivation; introduce a new form of assessment carefully; establish a clear framework and guidelines; help students to understand assessment criteria; pay careful attention to organizational details and procedures and pay particular attention to how you award marks and for what." The workshop method helps students in deep learning. With reference to Bloom's cognitive categories If poor presentations help 'remembering' and 'understanding' workshops help in 'analyzing' and 'evaluating'. Though oral Presentations are expected to "turn the tertiary classroom into an active learning environment; and give you the chance to learn from your peers and to share your knowledge with them (Why are oral presentations part of assessment at university?, 2007)." The Workshop Model seems to serve this purpose better.

"Innovative assessment … has the potential to encourage students to take an interest in their studies, work hard, engage in genuine or deep learning and produce good outcomes which will have long lasting benefits(McDowell and Sambell, 2003:80)." Therefore, further work has to be carried out on this topic. A comparative evaluation of Oral Presentations and the Workshop Method is proposed by assessing students in different tutorials in the same subject with the two assessment methods. A survey of academics who use Oral presentations as an assessment method would prove useful in identifying areas for improvement. The outcomes could be evaluated for a better understanding of the efficacy of each system. Furthermore, in collaboration with researchers in the field of data mining, clustering of students based on their nationality, educational background etc is proposed to study student learning habits based on assessment types.

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