

# Using Peers to Assess Oral Presentations to Foster Learning

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## Abstract

Oral presentations are known to be associated with a great deal of student anxiety as a result of little or no previous experience, and/or the fear of appearing foolish through lack of knowledge or understanding of the material they are presenting. Formative feedback prior to summative assessment has been shown to help students considerably with overcoming apprehension in oral communication. Such formative assessment needs to include peer assessment so that all students understand the standard required. Clear and precise rubrics detailing the educators' expectations, which are made available to students well ahead of time, can increase and improve student success in developing oral communication skills.

## Introduction

Assessment is the most influential aspect of learning in higher education (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999). For assessment to assist the achievement of learning outcomes it must motivate students, be at a level which is both challenging and achievable, and it must come with feedback (Price, Carroll, O'Donovan & Rust, 2011). Assessment should also certify that a standard of student performance has been reached and satisfy measures of quality (Price et al., 2011).

Learners are known to be strategic with their time, choosing primarily to focus on content that will be assessed (Boud & Associates, 2010; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Such student views have led academics to develop strategies where everything is assessed. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) however, argue that the most important aspect in designing assessments is to stimulate interest in the learning task.

A well designed assessment task should be educative (Brookhart, 1999), relevant (Meyers & Nulty, 2009) and authentic. Authentic assessment tasks simulate the kinds of work performed by practitioners in a discipline, whereas educative tasks help students understand the real world of work (Brookhart, 1999). Oral presentations are common authentic assessment tasks (Boud & Associates, 2010) which develop student skills in communication.

The development of communication skills is widely acknowledged as an important objective of tertiary education with good oral communication skills considered to be of significant

vocational importance (Hay, 1994). Oral communication skills are now listed as ‘graduate capabilities’ in many universities (Biggs & Tang, 2009, p. 4). Many professional courses, such as law, accounting and medicine, use assessments which require students to respond verbally rather than in writing (Joughin, 2007). In these disciplines, the type of oral presentation varies widely, extending from the traditional oral talk on research or term projects to panel discussion, viva voce examinations, interviews and debates (Farris & Tagg, 1996).

This diversity of oral presentations is increasingly popular in tertiary education for a variety of reasons. First, they are a more authentic form of communication which graduates will need in job interviews and also in day to day communication in the work place (Huxham, Campbell & Westwood, 2010). Oral presentations are also more inclusive. Students with disabilities, such as dyslexia, who find written assessments difficult, may perform better in oral assessments (Huxham et al., 2010). Oral presentations may also allow students to demonstrate a higher level of cognitive thinking (Kerby & Romine, 2009). The explanation of concepts by students can provide examiners with better insight into student understanding as ideas need to be described clearly and logically. Joughin (1998, 2007) states that if students know that their understanding will be questioned following an oral presentation they will be more motivated to engage and understand rather than reproduce the content in order to avoid appearing foolish. It is also more difficult for students to cheat or collude in oral presentations because students need to describe the concepts in their own words (Huxham et al., 2010).

Several aspects require consideration when planning to embed oral presentations in a degree. These include: the type and frequency of oral presentations in the curriculum and how the development of oral presentation skills will be scaffolded (Doree, Jardine & Linton, 2007). Studies have found that although oral presentations are a popular form of assessment, very few degree structures have well developed plans to advance student oral communication skills (Kerby & Romine, 2009) and as a result, few students know how to prepare a talk (Doree et al., 2007). Given that oral presentations are reported to be associated with high levels of anxiety (Huxham et al., 2010; Joughin, 2007), the lack of structure in a degree and perhaps insufficient experience in oral assessments (Huxham et al., 2010) is likely to increase student anxiety. Anxiety arises because students’ level of understanding is more readily on show in an oral presentation and as a result there are more opportunities for students to feel inadequate and foolish when they have insufficient understanding or knowledge or are unable to answer questions (Joughin, 2007). To decrease anxiety and improve student skills in oral presentations requires academics, in a planned way, to embed a structure in the curriculum which scaffolds student skills so that students gradually build confidence and competence (Hay, 1994). Oral presentation skills can be developed through exposing students to professional speakers in person or on tape (Hay, 1994) and through preparing and delivering practice presentations to peers (Doree et al., 2007).

## **Principles of Assessment and Their Application to Oral Presentations**

If student skills in oral presentations are to be developed successfully, students need to be assessed formatively prior to being assessed summatively. Formative assessment refers to assessment that is meant to generate feedback on performance and lead to improved learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In contrast, summative assessment occurs after a period of learning and is used to make a final judgment on the quality of learning (Boston, 2002). Thus, formative assessment is 'assessment for learning' and summative assessment is 'assessment for certification' or 'assessment of learning' (Boud, 2000). Both types of assessment are important and have their place in the curriculum, and both influence student learning (Boud, 2000). Summative assessment provides students with information on what is important and what they should be learning (Boud, 2000). In contrast, formative assessment describes a process where students complete a task and compare their current level of performance to an ideal level. Once this feedback has been received, they work to close the gap, using the feedback on their progress and then repeat the process with the idea that each subsequent round would be an improvement on the previous one (Brookhart, 2003). For this to take place, students must achieve three things: they must develop a concept of their learning goal; they must be able to evaluate the quality of their work against the ideal; and finally they must be able to act in a way that bridges the gap between the actual and desired performance (Brookhart, 2003). The delivery of the feedback required by the students in order to achieve these goals is sometimes referred to as 'formative feedback' (Brookhart, 2003). This type of feedback is especially useful to low achieving students as it informs them that they can achieve their desired goal if they try harder, rather than falsely allowing them to believe that they are bound to fail as a result of an imagined lack of aptitude (Boston, 2002).

A number of studies have identified feedback as the most important factor associated with student achievement (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In order for feedback to be useful, however, it must be specific and timely. Immediate feedback has been shown to improve student performance (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). If students are not provided with feedback swiftly, then they are more likely to disregard it when it is finally received, as too much time has passed between the task and the associated feedback. Delayed untimely feedback can be irrelevant to the new learning task and regardless of how complete, it might be worthless (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). The immediate functionality of the feedback becomes clear to students when they receive it just in time, that is, just before they need the skills that they will be assessed on (Svinicki, 2004). One of the aims of formative assessment tasks is ultimately to improve performance in summative tasks (Crisp, 2012). If this connection is well explained to the students, they should be able engage with the feedback received in a productive manner (Crisp, 2012). However, students rarely read feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). According to Richardson and Healy (2012), it is very difficult to convince students of the value of formative feedback which promotes self-reflection and generates improvement in their work.

A study conducted in the 1950s, and replicated in 2001, found that the emotional and psychological investment in producing a piece of work had a much stronger effect on students than the passive receipt of feedback (Rust, 2002). When students were asked to repeat the task, they made the same mistakes, regardless of the fact that these had been identified to them in the feedback received for the original task (Rust, 2002). Thus, it would seem that the only way students may pay attention to feedback is to get them to repeat the work, with reference to the feedback given to them (Rust, 2002). Boud (2000) in agreement with Rust, (2002) argued that if students are not given the opportunity to ‘complete the feedback loop’ (Boud, 2000) then it is both impossible for them to use feedback effectively and for the educator to know whether the feedback has been of value (Boud, 2000). Engagement with feedback is thus most useful when the purpose of the feedback is clear, it has utility and can be applied to future tasks (Price et al., 2011). The immediate formative feedback provided on oral presentations has the advantage of being useful and directly applied to improve on a final summative oral presentation.

Another positive aspect related to formative feedback is that it is not associated with grades. When feedback is provided on summative work, it tends to justify the grade rather than focus on developing learning (Price et al., 2011). Students have been known to interpret a poor grade as a comment about them rather than the quality of work produced (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Grades or marks by themselves do not necessarily provide information on which aspects of the work presented are satisfactory or where improvement is needed (Boud & Associates, 2010). In contrast, feedback without a grade is more likely to be perceived as a judgment on what has been learned (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004).

## **Peer Assessment of Oral Presentations**

Peer assessment provides another layer of evaluation of oral presentations. When peer assessment is used, it is thought to empower learners and contribute to deeper learning and self-reflection (Langan, Wheeler, Shaw, Haines, Cullen, Boyle, Penney, Oldekop, Ashcroft, Lockey & Preziosi, 2005). It also allows students to develop skills in objective assessment of their peers, which will be useful after graduation.

Formative peer assessment of an oral presentation also provides the presenters with immediate feedback. While this type of feedback may not be as accurate as feedback from an experienced academic, if provided directly after the presentation, it allows both the presenter and other students to develop a sense of what constitutes a ‘good attempt’ which can be used to contrast with their own work (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Providing peers with feedback increases a student’s sense of responsibility and brings to the surface misconceptions he or she might have of the material (Ramsden, 2003). In this way peer assessment encourages students to become active participants in managing their own learning and leads to the development of higher order cognitive skills (Pearce, Mulder & Baik, 2009). Effective peer

review is closely associated with self-assessment, requiring similar proficiencies essential in life-long learning (Pearce et al., 2009).

There is, however, debate about the effectiveness of peer assessment when it is summative. For example, Langan et al. (2005) found gender bias to be an issue in peer assessment. They determined that females mark consistently regardless of the sex of the oral presenters, but males mark females lower than other males (Langan et al. 2005). The gender bias issue, however, is likely to be dependent upon the task (Langan et al., 2005). Another matter that needs to be taken into consideration when using summative peer assessment is to moderate the final grades, as marks awarded by students have been found to be either consistently substantially higher (Magin & Helmore, 2001) or consistently lower than those awarded by experienced academic staff (Hughes & Large, 1993). The difference in grades between students and academics can be reduced if students are provided with criteria that are explicit and which they understand, because then their judgment will be more accurate (Falchikov & Goldfinch 2000). Thus, if peer assessment is to be implemented alongside tutor assessment, it would best be formative in nature, at least until it becomes a standard part of the curriculum across institutions, and students are comprehensively taught how to participate in the process.

## **Rubrics**

Rubrics have been widely used to assist students and academics provide judgments on students work. Rubrics are descriptive rating scales (Brookhart, 1999) with explicit explanations of the criteria for success. They have been used where judgments about the quality of the work produced are necessary and the descriptors tend to span a range of performance bands from substandard through to excellent (Brookhart, 1999). Clear rubrics set out student expectations from the outset (Hay, 1994). To be most effective, students need to engage with rubrics early in the semester. Whether holistic or analytical, when rubrics are used, students are more likely to derive correct conclusions about the quality of the work they produce (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004, Boud & Associates, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that oral presentations build the communication skills of students which are required beyond the course of study. Oral presentations can also provide insights into students' understanding of concepts either through the content of the presentation and/or the discourse which follows. Oral presentations have the advantage of allowing immediate feedback to correct any misunderstandings. This is in contrast to the delayed feedback on written assessment tasks. Although the value of assessment tasks with an oral component is well known, not many courses have a plan for the development of the oral communication skills of their undergraduates or postgraduates. Yet, it is a skill that can be learnt and therefore it needs to be embedded in the curriculum. Ideally, when teaching oral presentation skills, students need instructions on what constitutes a good presentation, be provided with opportunities to practice and be given immediate feedback on how the presentation compared

to the standard described in an analytical rubric. The implementation and assessment of oral presentations in the curriculum described in this review could be called ‘constructive alignment’ (Biggs, 2012). In such an ‘aligned system of instruction’ (Biggs, 2012), teachers must be very clear about what they want the students to learn, and then teach and assess them accordingly. The ways in which such a system of instruction for oral presentations could be put into place have been provided in this article. Such a practice of oral presentation instruction could support students to become self-directed learners (Boud & Associates, 2010).

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