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Assessing what we have taught: The challenges faced with the assessment of oral presentation skills

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Abstract: *The changing nature of higher education in Australia has shifted our focus as teaching and learning professionals, in that the teaching of skills has become as important as the teaching of content. In response, the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) law school has taken a scholarly approach and designed an assessment framework to assure the quality of skills assessment. This paper will explore some of the challenges that we have faced in implementing this framework, particularly in relation to validity and reliability, in the context of an oral presentation assessment task for first year law students. It will reveal the inherent tensions that arise between striving towards quality assessment and the pragmatic realities of full-time staff that have traditionally focused on teaching legal content, large student cohorts and teaching teams of between ten to fourteen tutors, where many are casual staff. This paper will also discuss how it is proposed that the implementation of criterion-referenced assessment, in response to university policy, will address some of these issues.*

Keywords: *assessment framework, oral presentations*

Introduction

The nature of higher education in our contemporary society is changing. For Australian law schools this has meant a shift from teaching purely legal content to, in addition, the teaching of legal and generic skills that have been identified as important to the success of law graduates in the workplace. The Pearce Report (1987) concluded that the teaching of skills be given greater emphasis in law schools. This Report also identified several key skills that required greater emphasis, being oral expression and legal advocacy, drafting and negotiation and interpersonal skills. In turn, the Australian Law Reform Commission, when conducting a review of the Federal Civil Justice System (1999), recommended that legal education should focus more on “what lawyers need to be able to do” rather than “what lawyers need to know”, which had been our traditional law school approach.

The Queensland University of Technology Law School has integrated legal and generic skills throughout the four years of its undergraduate law degree. Students are assisted to gradually develop each identified skill as they progress through their degree (Christensen & Kift, 2000). With the teaching of skills came the challenge of how to assess those skills in a way that would accurately determine whether a student had achieved the required standard of competency (Kift, 2002).

The importance of the design of assessment has been heightened by the priority placed upon it by our students. Ramsden (1992) has said that “from our students’ point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum.” Biggs (2003) contended that “students learn what they think they will be tested on.” We were therefore mindful that our assessment tasks should clearly align with our student learning objectives.

With this in mind, the Queensland University of Technology Law School obtained a university large teaching grant to assure the quality of the assessment of student capabilities, that is, legal and generic skills. The Large Grant team commenced with the hypothesis that, if a clear step by step assessment framework aimed at ensuring the quality of assessment was developed, an assessment item could then be evaluated against each criteria to ascertain whether it was in fact a quality assessment task. After extensive research, a draft assessment framework was developed (Kift, 2002, Kift & Nulty, 2003). This assessment framework has now been trialed and evaluated.

This paper will discuss some aspects of this assessment framework that we have had difficulty in implementing in the assessment of an oral presentation assessment task. This task is undertaken by students in a large core first year unit, *Law Society and Justice*, in the undergraduate law degree. It will discuss the challenges we have confronted in striving to achieve quality of assessment, particularly in relation to validity and reliability, in the face of large student cohorts and teaching teams dominated by casual staff. It will also examine the feedback that we have obtained from formal student evaluations in the unit in 2003 and 2004 and the steps being undertaken to improve the quality of assessment. One such step is the implementation of criterion-referenced assessment that has been introduced in 2005, in response to university policy.

Design of the oral presentation assessment task

The ability to prepare and deliver an effective oral presentation is one of the skills integrated into the QUT undergraduate law degree. Students are expected to reach a basic level of competency in a first year unit. They then have the opportunity to gradually develop their skills in subsequent law units as they progress through their degree.

It has been said that oral assessment “has a long history and continues to form an important part of the assessment repertoire of universities” (Brown & Knight, 1994). Joughin (1998) has noted that there are two different sets of qualities that can be measured in an oral assessment task, firstly the student’s command of the oral medium, that is, the student’s oral communications skills, and secondly, the student’s command of the content, demonstrated through the oral medium.

Traditionally in our Law School, we had focused on assessing legal content rather than student command of the oral medium. In the undertaking of scholarly research on assessment we revisited what Rowntree (1977) had referred to as the “primary content type” or “what one is looking for, or remarking upon, in the people one is assessing.” This exercise caused us to rethink what skills we were actually seeking to develop in our students. As a result, we decided to depart from our traditional law school approach and develop appropriate criteria to assess both legal content and qualities such as verbal and non-verbal communication skills.

The development of our assessment criteria was informed by scholarly research (Nightingale et al. 1996; Race, 2001; Brown, Bull & Pendelbury, 1997; Morgan, Dunn, Parry & O’Reilly, 2004). We arrived at a set of criteria in 2003 which also used in 2004. For 2005 this criteria has been expanded and transferred into the form of criterion-referenced assessment. This was required due to a change in university policy.

The QUT assessment policy states: “Criterion-referenced assessment requires the determination and communication of detailed and clear criteria, each with performance standards, in advance of the assessment. Well-designed and clearly communicated criteria and performance standards will invest the assessment process with a great deal of objectivity, but of necessity the process must also rely on the professional judgement of those doing the assessing.” (Queensland University of Technology Assessment Policy, 9.1.3 Approach to assessment - Criterion-referenced Assessment).

The advantage of criterion-referenced assessment is that all criteria and the standards students are expected to achieve to reach certain levels are explicitly identified (Morgan, Dunn, Parry & O’Reilly, 2004). Race (2001) stated that when assessing oral presentations the criteria must be clear from the outset and that students need to understand the weighting of criteria.

The assessment task takes place in small group tutorials of 20-25 students. Due to student numbers (1000 students in 2002, which have reduced to 600 students in 2005), the oral presentation is a group task where groups of 4-5 students research and then present their oral presentation to their tutorial group. Tutorials run for 90 minutes and the oral presentation will take from 20 to 30 minutes, depending on the number of students in the group. Each student is required to speak for 6 minutes. The oral presentation is marked by the tutor, and the tutor is assisted by written student peer feedback on the presentation received from the student audience. Although students present in a group, they receive an individual marked criteria sheet and an individual mark. Immediately after the presentation, the tutor provides the group with oral feedback on their group’s performance. In the following week, each student is provided with written feedback via a criteria sheet, completed by their tutor. At the end of the semester, each student is provided with an individual mark which is posted on the online teaching website for the unit.

An examination of the assessment framework in the context of this oral presentation assessment task

The assessment framework that was developed consists of a list of requirements, distilled from the educational literature (Biggs, 2003; Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997; Brown, Race & Smith, 1996; Cannon & Newble, 2000; Brown, Rust & Gibbs, 1994; Habeshaw, Gibbs & Habeshaw, 1993; Ramsden, 1992; Rowntree 1977). The assessment framework was developed by Kift & Nulty (2003). It has been discussed in detail in other forums (eg. Kift, 2002) and can be briefly summarised as follows:

- Is the assessment **valid and reliable**?
- Is the assessment **fair**?
- Is the assessment **unambiguous** in its intention, in that students can see the relevance and purpose of the assessment activity?
- Is the assessment **authentic** in that it replicates what students will be required to do in the workplace?
- Does the assessment **help students to develop** in the area being assessed?
- Does the assessment help teachers to teach by providing timely **formative feedback** to teachers?
- Is the assessment workload **manageable** by both staff and students?
- Does the assessment provide **equal opportunity**, in that all students are provided with the same level of support and the only limiting factor will be the work the student puts into the task and their ability?
- Is the assessment **ethical**, for example, it should not require students to complete tasks that conflict with their religious beliefs or that carry any health risks?

The focus of this paper is to describe the challenges we have faced in the implementation of several aspects of this assessment framework, particularly validity and reliability and the provision of formative

feedback, in our large first year core unit. The issues that have arisen and the steps being taken to address them are outlined below.

Is the assessment valid and reliable?

Validity

Validity requires that the assessment item measure what we want it to measure. The concept of “validity” has many aspects, and this paper will examine construct validity and content validity.

Construct validity is whether the assessment task measures the underlying theory or factors on which the assessment is based (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury, 1997). In this task we set out to measure student understanding of unit content and oral presentation skills, both verbal and non-verbal. Content validity is the extent to which the assessment task adequately measures the content or skills that have been covered in the unit of study. There should be a match between unit objectives, the instruction and the assessment material (Nightingale et al, 1996).

The assessment task requires students to research and apply their content knowledge in addition to demonstrating effective oral presentation skills in the form of effective verbal and non-verbal communication skills. These relate directly to the stated student learning objectives of this first year unit (Morgan, Dunn, Parry & O’Reilly, 2004).

The assessment task sets out to test both content knowledge and specific skills. Students are asked to present oral presentations on topics that closely link to the unit content. However, at present, a concern is that students do not receive adequate skills instruction in verbal and non-verbal communication skills. In 2004 and 2005, during tutorial time, students were shown a video of an oral presentation performed by past students that demonstrated effective verbal and non-verbal communication. However, no further skills instruction or an opportunity to practise these skills was given. There have been issues with using further tutorial time for skills instruction. Some staff in the unit have made it clear that they are either not prepared or reluctant to spend more tutorial time on skills instruction, being of the view that the focus should be on legal content. However, in terms of validity, if students are not being given an opportunity to practise these skills one could argue that it is not valid to test them on these skills.

“Reliability” refers to the extent to which an assessment strategy yields like results in like circumstances (Nightingale et al, 1996). It includes whether the assessment method enables marking consistency between the various academic and part-time staff in the unit (Morgan, Dunn, Parry & O’Reilly, 2004). The question being, if several different tutors marked the same oral presentation, would they all award the same mark? The criteria sheet is crucial to reliability (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997). The criteria need to clearly articulate what a student needs to demonstrate to comply with the various levels of performance standards. With large teaching teams in this unit, large numbers of casual staff (for example, in 2003 we had 13 staff involved in this unit, with 10 being casual tutors) and high staff turnover, the drafting of the criteria sheet is crucial to reliability.

Bone (1999) stated that “arguably the most important link between learning outcomes and successful assessment methods is the use of explicit marking criteria.” In addition, we acknowledge that consistent marking of oral communication tasks is difficult as there is the issue of subjectivity (Morgan, Dunn, Parry & O’Reilly, 2004).

In 2005 we redrafted the criteria sheet in the form of a criterion-referenced assessment sheet, however, it failed to omit subjective language such as “highly appropriate”. To attempt to counter this we have again redrafted the criteria sheet to delete subjective language such as “highly relevant” and “effective”.

In addition we have used a process of student peer feedback, where students in the tutorial audience provide their written feedback on the oral presentation to their tutor, this feedback being used by the tutor when arriving at a suitable mark for each student. The criteria sheet to be used in 2006 is attached for discussion.

Is the assessment fair?

“Fairness” relates to whether students are provided with enough information to understand what characterises high quality work and the performance standards that apply to each marking criterion (Dunn, Morgan, O’Reilly & Parry 2004). This again has been a major challenge. In 2003, to assist students to understand what would characterise high quality work, a video obtained from the university library demonstrating good oral presentation skills was shown during a tutorial, very early in the semester. A formal student evaluation of the unit indicated that many students did not find the video helpful and felt that it had been shown too early in the semester. In 2004 a video of one group of students from the previous year presenting in this unit was shown to students. This time a mixed response was obtained from students in formal evaluations. Some found the video helpful, others felt that it demonstrated to them more examples of what not to do than examples of what they should be doing. In 2005, a small university teaching and learning grant is enabling us to produce our own video, in an attempt to provide students with a more helpful resource that will demonstrate to them what constitutes high quality communication skills. It is anticipated that this will also assist with reliability.

Student feedback in these formal evaluations has also highlighted that students have been confused as to what they had to demonstrate to attain the various levels of achievement. Due to these difficulties and the change in university policy it is hoped that the introduction and refinement of criterion-referenced assessment will assist by providing students and tutors with a basis for discriminating between different levels of achievement. In turn we envisage that this should result in a higher level of both reliability and fairness for this assessment activity.

Does the assessment method help students to develop their oral presentation skills?

The key to an effective skills assessment task is that it assists students to develop and improve their skills. Formative feedback gives students an idea of how they are progressing and assists them in their learning process (Biggs, 2003). Brown, Bull and Pendlebury (1997) stated that students do better at oral presentation tasks when provided with learning opportunities, guidance and feedback and contended that video feedback was the most effective method of improving oral communication skills, together with providing guidance to students in how to analyse their presentations and providing them with opportunities to develop their own self-assessment skills.

In this respect the tension between large student cohorts and a quality assessment task becomes apparent. Although the use of video feedback has been considered, it is not possible to video oral presentations in the large number of tutorials running across the week (27 tutorials in 2005) as both the organizational requirements and the cost is prohibitive. Further, due to the time needed to be spent learning unit content and also dissent from some staff, we have not introduced an activity into tutorials to give students the opportunity to practise their verbal and non-verbal communication skills and receive formative feedback from their tutor.

Ramsden (1992) has suggested using assessment that supports student learning by incorporating feedback opportunities into summative assessment. In line with this, we have incorporated both oral and written feedback opportunities into this summative task. Students are provided with oral feedback immediately after presenting. In the following week they each receive a criteria sheet from their tutor containing written feedback.

After identifying that the absence of formative feedback was a fundamental weakness in this assessment activity, we have in 2005 built into the assessment task opportunities for student self-reflection. Students are asked to complete a reflection sheet before they commence the task setting out what they consider to be their current strengths and weaknesses in the preparation and performance of oral presentations. At the conclusion of the task, they are asked to reflect upon the level of performance they achieved and to think about the ways in which they have improved their skills during the process. This is designed to assist students to reflect upon what they have learnt from the experience and how they have developed their verbal and non-verbal skills (Morgan, Dunn, Parry & O'Reilly, 2004).

The peer feedback of student performances also gives students opportunities for reflection. By observing the performances of other students' while they are completing the peer feedback sheets, students can reflect on the skills of others with a view to improving their own future performance.

Is it manageable, in the sense that it is efficient and effective for both students and academics?

Several strategies have been employed to assist with the reality that with between 600-1000 students in our unit, it is essential that the assessment task be manageable for both teaching staff and students (Kift, 2002). The primary way in which manageability has been achieved has been to design the oral presentation as a group task. Students are required to research and present their oral presentation as a group. This reduces the workload for students and ensures that there is a realistic amount of time spent by tutors during tutorials listening to and assessing oral presentations. Formal student feedback has been mixed about the oral presentation being a group task. Some students have given extremely positive feedback, stating that, as it was their first semester of law school, working in a group task enabled them to meet other students and to have the opportunity to work with them. On the other hand, some students disliked working in a group and found it difficult, particularly when all group members did not contribute equally to the division of task, particularly the legal research.

Other suggestions of Gibbs (1992) have been implemented in this unit to make assessment more manageable. The assessment task has been 'front-ended' to minimise any problems that may occur later. That is, considerable time has been invested in preparation of full instructions, clarifying and publishing the assessment criteria in advance; and by fully preparing students for the task by explaining the assessment criteria in class and ensuring that they understand it.

A further suggestion by Gibbs (1992) has been implemented that staff be able to spend time in class on assessment. The introduction of criterion-referenced assessment will assist with this suggestion. Comprehensive assessment criteria has been used in 2005 which staff can complete during the presentation (if they elect to) and hand to students the following week. Final marks will be released at the end of semester so that tutors have the chance to view several performances and apply the criteria to them before having to allocate final marks.

Conclusion

For teaching professionals in our law school, the development of an assessment framework has highlighted the factors that characterise a quality assessment task. It has also ensured that we take a more scholarly approach to the design of our assessment tasks. This paper has highlighted the challenges we face working in the environment of a law school with large student numbers in which staff have traditionally focused on teaching legal content, not skills. We acknowledge that concerns remain that our present assessment task is not sufficiently valid and reliable as ideally we need to provide students with some opportunity to practise their verbal and non-verbal communication skills and to receive formative feedback. Although

creative methods have been employed to build in feedback into the summative assessment task and to encourage students to reflect on how they have improved their communication skills, we consider that we still have further work to do to refine the assessment task.

We are currently working on producing a video that will more effectively demonstrate to students high quality communications skills. We have also redrafted the 2005 criteria to remove the use of subjective language, to assist both students and tutors in clearly understanding what is required to achieve the various performance levels. To assist with the refinement of the assessment task, at the conclusion of this paper I will show a small section of a student oral presentation and ask the audience to refer to the draft 2006 criteria sheet, in particular the criterion, verbal and non-verbal criterion. I will then ask for audience feedback as to the appropriateness of the criterion.

LWBI 42 Criteria Sheet Oral presentation (20%)

Topic:

Name of student:

Week and Tutorial:

Elements	7 (20-17)	6-5 (16-13)	4 (12-10)	3 (9-6)	2-1 (5-1)
Content and Analysis (4 marks)	All content linked to the topic and demonstrated an understanding of all concepts. All or most of the essential concepts were analysed and explained.	Most content linked to the topic and demonstrated an understanding of most concepts. Most of the essential concepts were analysed and explained.	Most of the content linked to the topic, some irrelevant content and you demonstrated an understanding of some concepts. Some of the essential concepts were analysed and explained.	Content didn't link to topic and you demonstrated an understanding of some concepts. Few concepts were analysed or they were not always essential to the topic and/or lacked effective explanations.	No content linked to topic and you did not demonstrate understanding of any concepts. You had difficulty analysing and explaining concepts.
Structure (3 marks)	Your presentation dealt with issues one at a time. You dealt with issues in a logical order. The material was delivered within a suitable time frame.	Your presentation dealt with issues one at a time. Most issues were dealt with in a logical order. The material was delivered within a suitable time frame.	Your presentation skipped from issue to issue. Some issues were dealt with in a logical order. Your presentation ran 5 mins over time.	Your presentation skipped from issue to issue. Issues were not dealt with in a logical order. Your presentation went more than 5 min time.	Your presentation skipped from issue to issue and had no logical order. Your presentation ran more than 10 min over the time limit.
Equity and team linkages (2 marks)	You contributed as a team member to the research and delivery of the presentation. Your segment linked to the next presenter/ overall presentation.	You contributed as a team member to the research and delivery of the presentation. Your segment linked to the next presenter/ overall presentation.	You contributed as a team member. Your segment had some links to the overall presentation.	You did not contribute as a team member to the research and delivery of the presentation. Your segment was poorly linked to the next presenter's segment/ overall presentation.	You did not contribute to the research and delivery of the presentation. Your segment had no links to the next presenter's segment/ overall presentation.
Non-Verbal (4 marks)	Open body language (eg. no crossed arms or legs). You maintained consistent eye contact with your audience throughout and only occasionally referred to your material.	Open body language. You read your material, however, made regular eye contact with your audience.	Some closed body language. You read your material and made occasional eye contact with your audience.	Your body language was often closed. You read your material and eye contact was rarely made with your audience.	Closed body language and/ or you read your entire presentation without making any eye contact with your audience
Verbal (4 marks)	Words were pronounced correctly and confidently. Confident and clear articulation at all times, your pace was slow enough so that your audience could understand your content, and you made consistent use of vocal variation	Words were pronounced correctly. Confident and clear articulation throughout most of your presentation. You needed to slow your pace at times, and you made use of vocal variation.	Familiar words were pronounced correctly. Confident and clear articulation throughout some of your presentation. You need to slow your pace/ speak louder or softer and/ or make more use of vocal variation.	You experienced some significant problems with pronunciation. At many times you did not exhibit confident and clear articulation. You need to slow your pace/ speak louder or softer and/ or make more use of vocal variation.	Pronunciation problems make your presentation difficult to understand. You did not exhibit confident and clear articulation. You need to slow your pace/ speak louder or softer and/ or make more use of vocal variation.
Outline Visual Aids (If used) (2 marks)	There were clear conceptual links between the issues in your presentation and your visual aids.	There were clear conceptual links between the issues in your presentation and the majority of content in your visual aids.	There were clear conceptual links between the issues in your presentation and some of the content of your visual aids.	There were few conceptual links between the issues in your presentation and your visual aids.	There were no conceptual links between the issues in your presentation your visual aids.
Completion of Reflection sheet (1 mark)	Sheet comprehensively completed.	Sheet well completed.	Sheet completed adequately.	Sheet handed in but fully completed.	Didn't hand in sheet.

Mark:

Additional Comments (if any)

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