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## Assessing oral presentations in open and distance learning

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## **ASSESSING ORAL PRESENTATIONS IN DISTANCE AND OPEN LEARNING**

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In light of the predominance of written communication skills in distance learning settings, there is a need to extend and improve opportunities for distance learning students to practice, develop and demonstrate their oral communication skills. Sophisticated oral communication skills are valued as important graduate skills within many academic disciplines and subject areas (HEA, 2009, p. 13). They are recognised as significant transferable skills with clear links to employability (Race, 1995). Indeed ‘most careers require [oral] communication skills; some require them far more than the kind of written skills fostered through written exams and essay assessments’ (HEA, n.d.). Furthermore, studies have shown that ‘oral presentations also promote other personal skills, such as self-confidence’ (HEA, n.d.). Joughin (1999) and Race (1995) highlight the potential impact of oral forms of assessment on students’ approaches to learning. Joughin argues, for example, that oral forms of assessment encourage deep approaches to learning that are focused on understanding, rather on than merely coping with the demands of the module or on the intention to achieve high grades (Joughin, 1999, p.151). It is also widely recognised that the diversification of methods of assessment leads to fairer, more reliable assessment of students as they can be rewarded for a broader range of skills and aptitudes (van der Vleuten, 2014; Race, 2005; HEA, n.d.). From this point of view, the assessment of oral presentations can provide ‘rewarding opportunities for students who believe they have an aptitude for oral expression and communication [...and...] work to refine those skills’ (HEA, n.d.).

While digital technology has created new opportunities to practice and assess a wider range of communication skills, including oral communication skills, the benefits and challenges of the use of digital tools for assessment purposes in HE requires further investigation and critical evaluation (Sinclair, 2011; Sinclair, 2013; Vonderwell & Boboc, 2013, p.22). This paper relates to the workshop themes of ‘Researching Learning Design’, ‘Researching 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and the role of ODL in up-skilling students’ and ‘Open and Distance Learning for Employability’. It critically engages with the findings of a research project I conducted between October 2013 and July 2014 on ‘Assessing oral presentations in distance learning’, funded by a Higher Education Academy (HEA) Individual Teaching Development grant. This research project investigates the benefits, challenges and wider applicability of a form of assessment that requires students to digitally record an oral presentation and submit it electronically as an audio file. This paper considers what this research reveals about students’ perceptions of the experience of delivering, recording and receiving feedback on a oral presentation given to a

virtual audience in an asynchronous setting. It also investigates tutors' views on the benefits and challenges of providing effective feedback on oral presentations in distance and open learning settings.

## **Methodology**

My research project focused on an assessment task that forms part of the OU Religious Studies module A332 *Why is religion controversial?* A332 was presented for the first time in October 2013 to June 2014. It is the first module in the OU Arts Faculty that includes an oral presentation in its assessment strategy, though there are two further new modules in Philosophy and Classical Studies (A340 and A333) that are planning to introduce this form of assessment. There has been great interest in the OU Arts Faculty in the wider application of this form of assessment. In my role a lecturer in Religious Studies, author of module materials, module team member and co-chair, I have been involved in the production and presentation of A332 and in the design of assessment tasks. I was also one of the 21 tutors who taught this module during its first presentation.

The assignment in question is the second of five tutor marked assignments that form part of the module's overall continuous assessment score (OCAS) and is divided into two parts. Part 1 consists of a 1,500 word essay based on a close-reading exercise, which requires students to answer a question in relation to a specified extract from an academic text. Students are also asked to append a list of at least three bullet points indicating the main points of their essay. The focus of this project was on Part 2 of this assignment, which requires students to digitally record a 3 minute audio presentation and submit it electronically as an audio file. Students were asked to base this presentation around the argument of the essay they wrote in response to Part 1, with specific reference to the main points they appended to it. They were advised to envisage an audience of fellow students who have not taken this module and have general knowledge of some of the issues involved, but are no experts in this specific area. An alternative format of assessment, which involved the submission of a written script for an oral presentation, was offered to students who were unable to communicate orally, but not to students who were not willing to deliver an oral presentation or could not submit an oral presentation because of technical difficulties. In the assessment of TMA02, the essay-based task submitted for part 1 was given a 75% weighting, while the oral presentation submitted for part 2 contributed 25% of the overall grade for TMA02. (TMA02 made up 20% of the OCAS.)

The initial phase of the project involved the design and distribution of two online surveys, one for students and another for tutors. Both questionnaires included a mixture of open and closed questions (Brewer, 2003; Cottrell, 2008; O'Leary & Dowds, 2003) and were distributed via the Qualtrics system used by the OU's Institute for Educational Technology's Student Statistics and Survey team. The student questionnaire aimed to establish how students perceive the experience and associated learning outcomes of delivering, recording and receiving feedback on a presentation given to a virtual audience in an asynchronous setting. The tutor questionnaire aimed to establish tutors' views on the benefits and challenges of

providing effective feedback on oral presentations from a distance. 303 students were invited to take the survey and 135 students responded (4 of which only partially completed the survey), giving a 43.6% response rate based on complete responses. Out of these, 126 students had submitted the presentation task, 4 had completed the alternative assignment task and 5 had not completed this task. 21 tutors were invited to take part in the survey by email and 17 questionnaires were completed, giving an 80.6% response rate based on complete responses.

In addition to the 19 assignments from students in my own tutor group that I marked in my role as tutor and 9 assignments that I monitored as part of my role as a module team member, I listened to 21 samples of the submitted oral presentations and read the related tutor feedback, looking for common themes and issues in the ways students approached this assignment task and the ways tutors assessed and provided feedback on it. I listened to 7 examples of audio presentations (and read the related feedback from tutors on these assignments) where that were scored highly by their tutors, 7 that received medium scores and 7 that were scored low.

Based on the findings of this research, I developed a toolkit with accessible guidance on good practice in assessment design and the provision of feedback on oral presentations in distance learning settings. All tutors and students from four tutor groups were invited to comment (either on the online forum or by e-mail) on a draft of this toolkit. A draft of this toolkit was posted on the modules' tutor forum (located on the A332 Tutor only website) and on four student group forums, and students and tutors were invited to comment either on the relevant forum strands or by e-mail. The findings of this project (including the toolkit) were also presented and discussed at the face-to-face tutor briefing after the completion of the first presentation of the module. The toolkit was revised in light of the comments and will soon be made publically available as a resource on the HEA website.

### **Project Findings**

The most prominent issues students raised in the survey concerned technical difficulties, either related to downloading the relevant software or zipping the audio file together with the word processed file from the essay and to submit both as a single file via the electronic assignment system. Some students reported incompatibilities of the OU's in-house audio recording tool (ART) with MAC computers or with different browsers. While ART has been used extensively within the context of modern foreign language modules in the OU, it was new to students from the Arts Faculty. However, students were not limited to using ART and could use alternatives. Detailed technical advice had been provided in the guidance notes for this assignment and further technical support was available to students via the OU Computing helpdesk. 60.1% of respondents found the technical guidance notes either 'helpful' or 'very helpful', but 27.6% did not find them helpful (which is an alarmingly high proportion) and 1.6% admitted that they had not read them. Four of the five students, who responded to the survey, but had not completed this part of the assignment, reported that they had not submitted a recording of an oral presentation because they felt daunted by or put off by the

technical requirements. One of these students explained, for example: 'My interest was in religion and not in whether or not I could successfully operate computer/software'. The project findings highlight the need to use technology that is as user-friendly and accessible as possible. Some of the technical issues that students encountered during the first presentation of A332 should hopefully be addressed in future presentations through the introduction of a new version of ART, which does not require students to download Java and is compatible with a wider range of browsers and software. The project findings also suggest that it is a good idea to find ways of encouraging students to familiarise themselves with the different technical aspects and check that their software is working in a less pressured environment well in advance of the assignment deadline. For the next presentation of A332, we have added a new online activity which encourages students to use the audio recording tool several weeks before the assignment deadline and record a three-minute oral response to an activity. This activity also helps students to get a better feel for how much can be said in three minutes and get used to the sound of a recording of their own voice and practice their presentation skills. In future presentations of A332, students will also be encouraged to practice the electronic submission of a zipped file as part of a 'dummy' assignment in the first week of the module. This way, the acquisition of different technical skills are gradually spaced out and practiced over several weeks in advance of the deadline.

The fact that the OU's student body is particularly diverse means that students bring a very different range of prior experiences to their studies. While 34.1% described themselves either as 'very experienced' or 'experienced' in the delivery of oral presentations (primarily due to their previous or current work experience), a large proportion of students (47.6%) had very little or no prior experience of giving oral presentations. Inexperienced students in particular need advice on presentation skills and opportunities to practice them before the assignment. This highlights the need to prepare both staff and students in the development of their presentation skills and assessment literacy - it should not be assumed that they already 'know' how to give an oral presentation or how to assess it. In the case of A332, the guidance notes for both students and teachers were revised and clarified in light of the project findings and links to relevant study skills resources on 'Giving presentations' from the *Skills for OU Study* pages were provided (The Open University, 2013). We also recorded a study skills podcast where students from my own tutor group talk about their experiences of completing this form of assessment (in a reassuring way) and give some practical advice. This podcast will be made available to students on future presentations of A332 on the module website. It will also be made available to other students on other modules in the OU Arts Faculty that are introducing this form of assignment.

In order to alleviate students' anxieties around this form of assessment – particularly if it is new to them – it is also helpful if it is given a relatively low weighting. Ideally, this form of assessment should be repeated to support students in developing their presentation skills based on their tutor's feedback (and 'feed forward') and in building their confidence. This insight is supported by a recent HEA report on 'Diversifying Assessment', based on a study of undergraduate modules in the history of science, which comes to the conclusion that 'The

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formative experiences derived from first attempts at presentations reduce anxiety and improve performance in subsequent attempts' (HEA, n.d.). This resonates with comments students made in the context of the survey, stating, for example:

*'Like some other students on the course, I was initially nervous, however, it really wasn't as bad as it seemed and has given me back the confidence to engage in this kind of activity again.'*

However, given that within the context of open and distance learning, the predominant form of tutor feedback and 'feed forward' is provided as part of tutor marked assignments, it might be problematic to include several oral presentations in the assessment strategy within the confines of a single module.

Another challenge arose out of the fact that although many OU tutors are very experienced in supporting distance learning, some had relatively little or no experience of assessing oral presentations, and for many of those tutors, who were experienced in assessing oral presentations through their work at other HE institutions, this experience was often limited to face-to-face settings. In their survey responses, tutors raised a range of challenges of assessing presentations at a distance, highlighting, for example, that 'there is no personal interaction, not clues of body language'. However, other tutors felt that hearing their students' voices helped them establish a more personal connection and even suggested providing oral feedback:

*'distance learning can become very impersonal, especially if students do not attend face-to-face tutorials. Having an oral presentation creates a more personal connection at least from my end! Perhaps my evaluation should also be oral.'*

The fact that the audio presentations were recorded and were relatively short meant that tutors could listen to them several times or go back to a particular point in a presentation for clarification. About a third of tutors, who responded to the survey, said that they listened at least twice to every presentation. The fact that the presentations were recorded also allowed students to listen to their own presentations. These are clear benefit in comparison to the transient nature of face-to-face presentations in live settings (Race, 2005). Even though the module team had provided tutors with marking guidance, relating to both, content and presentation skills, the analysis of feedback samples revealed considerable discrepancies in the amount and quality of feedback (and 'feed forward') tutors provided, in particular in relation to the relative weighting of presentation skills and content. This confirms Pickford and Brown's observation that while there is general acceptance that oral presentations should form part of assessment in HE, there is often confusion around what is actually being assessed (Pickford & Brown, 2006, p.59). Pickford and Brown highlight the need for a systematic approach and come to the conclusion that 'the most important success factor in the assessment of oral presentation skills is the specification and communication of clear assessment criteria' (p.62). This concerns clarity about 'the relative weighting of content and

delivery' and about the intended outcome or purpose of the presentation (Pickford & Brown, 2006, p.62; see also Race, 1995). Module teams within the OU context not only face the challenge of developing clear assessment criteria, but to convey them effectively to the team of tutors who are teaching and assessing the module. This highlights the need for careful preparation and ongoing support and dialogue between the module team and the tutors, for example in the form of improved marking guidance, briefings and staff development and moderation activities, particularly if tutors or module teams are new to this form of assessment.

Another challenge that was mentioned by both students and tutors in the surveys was the artificiality of the experience of delivering or assessing an asynchronous oral presentation at a distance to a virtual audience. In their responses to the online survey, students argued, for example, that 'Making a presentation without an audience is somewhat false', or that 'Face-to-face presentations allow you to bounce off the reaction from the audience and to gauge understanding and enjoyment. That is not possible with an imagined audience'. Given that a vast majority of 83.9% of the students, who responded to the survey, felt that giving a presentation to a virtual audience was 'not very similar' or 'completely different' to giving a presentation to a live, face-to-face audience, to the extent this form of assessment actually does equip students with transferable employability skills needs to be questioned. However, it could be argued that a short, digitally recorded presentation (comparable to a podcast) prepares students better for a world where 'more and more oral communication is at a distance, supported via the Internet, mobile communications technologies, video conferencing and multimedia presentations' (Pickford & Brown, 2006, p.61) and can play an important role in the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. From this point of view, all HE institutions – not just those with a specific focus on distance learning – need to think about new ways of developing and assessing students' oral communication skills that go beyond the traditional face-to-face setting and utilise different kinds of communication technologies (p.61).

Only a very small minority of 4.9% of students, who responded to the survey, indicated that they would have preferred a video to an audio presentation. The question of how helpful they would have found the submission of PowerPoint slides received a very mixed response, with 30.6 % of students indicating that they would have found this option 'very helpful' or 'helpful' and with 43.3% indicating that they would have found this option either 'unhelpful' or 'not at all helpful' (26% had 'no opinion' on this matter). However, a considerable majority of 70.8% found the requirement to base the presentation on at least three written bullet points (submitted as part of this assignment) either 'very helpful' or 'helpful'.

Some students stated that they regarded the absence of an immediate audience as a helpful stepping stone in overcoming 'stage fright' and in building their confidence in their presentation skills. They reported that they found it 'less nerve wrecking' than delivering a presentation to a live audience. A student commented, for example: 'You can't see the people in front of you, so you feel more free to express yourself in a more open way'. While some students developed coping strategies, such as asking family members to act as the audience, others struggled with the process, as the following comment by a student reveals: 'I scripted it

with the audience as detailed in the guidance notes in mind but have to admit that I couldn't envisage them when actually delivering it.' As Ong (2012, p.174) points out in his seminal exploration of the relationship between orality and literacy, the difficulty of envisaging an audience is not unique to the delivery of oral presentations at a distance:

*'The written text appears prima facie to be a one way informational street, for no real recipient (reader, hearer) is present when the text comes into being. But in speaking as in writing, some recipient must be present, or there can be no text produced: so isolated from real persons, the writer conjures up a fictional person or persons. [...] The fictionalizing of readers is what makes writing so difficult. The process is complex and fraught with uncertainties.'*

This means that the development of coping strategies that deal with the 'fraud' and 'uncertain' nature of an imagined or fictionalised audience can feed into the development of both written and oral communication skills. In fact, it could be argued that issues related to the fictionalisation of an audience can be raised and addressed more explicitly in the context of a digitally recorded oral presentation as the absence of an immediate audience is more keenly felt than in the context of a written assignment. The connection between oral and written communication skills and the benefits of 'what talking can do for academic writing' (Thompson, 2014) has been extensively explored by Elbow (2012). He argues that 'even serious, formal and "literate" writing can be even more careful and better, paradoxically enough, if it enlists various resources of careless speech' (pp.4f.). Though Elbow's work predominantly focuses on the benefits of 'unplanned, careless, spontaneous spoken language' (p.9), rather than relatively formal oral presentations, my project findings highlight the benefits of engaging different sensory modalities or physical media in the development of students' communication skills. A vast majority of 91.1% of students confirmed that they found the fact that there was a close link between the topics of the written essay and the spoken presentation 'very helpful' or 'helpful'. As the following quote from a student's response to the survey illustrates, some students explicitly stated that approaching a similar task through different media helped deepen their learning experience:

*'A benefit was that when I first did the sound recording [...], I discovered I'd missed an important point to be made in the essay conclusion.'*

This was echoed in a number of comments by other students who felt that their oral presentation for part 2 helped them with writing the essay for part 1.

Though there is clear evidence supporting the benefits of approaching the same or a similar topic through different media, the project findings also highlight the need for a clear rationale distinguishing both assessment tasks. The analysis of survey responses and assignment and feedback samples indicate some confusion amongst both, A332 students and tutors, around the difference between the content and purpose of the written essay and those of the oral presentation. One of the main differences (intended as part of the assessment design) concerned the target audience and the fact that the guidance notes asked students to envisage



a broader audience for the oral presentation than for the essay, i.e. an audience of fellow students who have not taken this module and have a general knowledge of some of the issues involved, but are not experts on this specific area. However, when questioned what kind of audience they actually envisaged, only half of the students, who took part in the survey, identified this particular type of audience. In order to address this issue, the assessment guidance notes were expanded and clarified for future presentations to emphasise the importance of the target audience and specific purpose of this oral presentation. Some further explanatory notes have also been added that outlined the main skills required for presenting to a broader audience and highlight the benefits and professional and practical relevance of the development of these skills.

## **Conclusions**

The project findings highlight the many challenges of using a digitally recorded audio presentation as part of assessment in the context of open and distance learning. These challenges include technical difficulties, the different levels of prior experience that students and tutors bring to the delivery and assessment of oral presentations (which are particularly diverse in open learning settings), the difficulties of designing clear assessment criteria and the challenges associated with communicating them to tutors and students, the ‘artificiality’ linked to the physical absence of the audience at the point of presentation and the challenges of the physical absence of the presenter at the point of assessment. In the case of the OU module at the centre of this study (A332), the design of this particular assessment task clearly required some further adjustments as well as the production of further resources in light of the project findings. However, on balance, it seems that the benefits of using this form of assessment outweigh the challenges. These benefits include the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century graduate skills with clear links to employability. As a tutor put it in response to the survey, this form of assignment can help students ‘find a “voice” that is both academic and engages a broader audience’. One of the most striking findings of this project has been the mutually beneficial relationship of the development of oral and written communication skills which can enable deep, effective learning experiences. However, the challenge of conveying these benefits effectively to staff and students remains.

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