

Assessing Student Presentations in Common Core Courses

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Introduction

In various guises – oral, video, poster, website – student presentations are becoming a well-established form of coursework assessment in twenty-first century higher education. They provide a means not only of developing students' ability to communicate information and ideas beyond the traditional written form, and within a given time-frame, but also of putting students' learning on open display, so that they can learn from and with one another.

In the HKU Common Core Curriculum, presentations are a form of assessment in about two out of five Scientific and Technological Literacy courses, and in around one-quarter of courses in the other three Areas of Inquiry (see fig. 1). Typically, presentations have a weighting of between 20% and 30% of the overall grade for a course.

This Briefing is based mainly on interviews with a sample of Common Core course coordinators who use presentations to assess their students' learning. It summarises how they have tried to assess presentations wisely, in ways that work well for their students and themselves. The Briefing is also set against the wider background of studies and experiences of assessing presentations in other universities. It includes a range of case examples of the use of assessed presentations in specific courses at HKU and elsewhere. Links to further resource materials can be found at <http://www.cetl.hku.hk/wise-assessment-forum/>.

Why assess through presentations?

A range of reasons are given for using presentations as a form of assessment. One is variety of challenge: presentations can bring 'a breath of fresh air', as one informant put it, to assessed learning. Another is 'real-world' authenticity: presentations are nowadays a common feature of the graduate workplace (see e.g. Doherty et al 2011; Berjano et al. 2013; Sinclair 2014). This rationale is usually closely linked to the need for students to gain practice in using a range of contemporary modes of communication to convey ideas and information.

Another line of reasoning builds on the value of communicating in an appropriately scientific and scholarly way to a visible audience. Presenting can foster critical thinking and creative problem-solving not only on the part of the student-presenters, but also amongst their

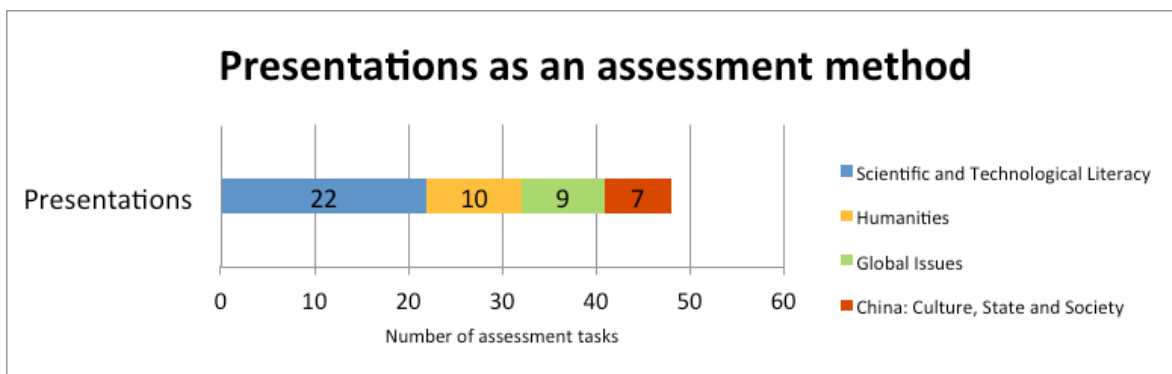


Figure 1: Number of Assessment Tasks by Types of Assessment Methods

audience of fellow-students as they engage in probing and questioning, comment and critique, debate and discussion Langan et al., 2003; Dobson, 2006.

Presentations by groups rather than individual students can add a further benefit – again mirroring the professional workplace – in calling for collaboration between students to explore different perspectives and together forge a joint argument. As one student observed in a Swedish study of group oral presentations in maths (Kågesten & Engelbrecht, 2007):

You obviously learn more if you study together than if you do it by yourself. Just because of this exchange of thoughts. When I study by myself I can get stuck on something and look it up in the book, but if there are a few of us, you can discuss how to solve it in different ways.



What do students present on?

In some courses, presentations focus on a topic, issue, theme or a set reading – whether generated by the students or chosen from a list drawn up by the teacher. If it is student-generated, some discussion of possibilities between a student or student group and the teacher is usually desirable to ensure that the topic is a manageable one in terms of time and level of difficulty. For longer presentations, preparing and discussing an outline may be a useful halfway-house.

In many other courses, presentations are related to a specific skill-building activity such as a project or field trip or series of interviews. The presentation can be the culmination of the task, or it can be linked to a

subsequent report, with the presentation component serving as a 'dry-run' that can help to fine-tune the report.

What forms do presentations take?

Ostensibly, the most straightforward form of presentation is an oral (or verbal) one, but even here there are choices to be made. Some teachers encourage or even require the use of slides, while others (mindful perhaps of the risk of 'death-by-Powerpoint or -Prezi') make slides optional or invite students to explore imaginative alternatives such as three-dimensional objects, role play, animations, a drama, or audience involvement. Producing a handout to accompany the talk (a useful skill in itself) is often also expected.

One alternative to the oral presentation is a video, but where (as some informants were keen to stress) the subject-matter of the course lends itself to this format – to record observations on a field-trip, for example, or to compile interviews with members of a local community. Videos are felt to be a feasible assignment option because the technology is now easy to use and widely available. In any event, one rule-of-thumb comes to the fore again and again: technical polish is relatively unimportant. What matters is the quality of the content of a presentation.

This rule-of-thumb applies with equal force to poster presentations, which can be less intimidating for students than oral ones (Akister et al, 2000). Poster presentations are most common in subject areas such as science, engineering, medicine and health, where they play a key role in scientific and professional communication. In one Common Core course, student posters were found to work well in a scaled-down A3 format – easily shared and discussed round a seminar table, and less technically demanding to prepare.

A close cousin to the presentation is the debate¹, where students are typically assigned to a group speaking for a motion, or to one opposing it.

Lastly, whatever form they take, boundaries of some kind need to be set on the length of presentations, whether in minutes or in terms of number of slides. Such boundaries typically apply both to the prepared part of a presentation (the talk or the video itself), and to the no less challenging questions and comments (Q&A) that follow. In the Common Core courses sampled, presentation times ranged from 5 minutes to half an hour, with between 3 and 10 minutes allotted to Q&A. In one instance, a 30-

¹ Debates are explored more fully in the companion Wise Assessment Briefing, Assessing Tutorial Participation

minute slot was considered desirable to acknowledge how much work had gone into the presentations.

Who does the presenting?

Presentations can be by individuals or by groups: both are to be found in the Common Core courses. Where presentations are by individual students, presentation times are necessarily shorter, and preparation too typically less protracted.

The maximum size of tutorial groups in the Common Core is twelve, which makes it feasible in some courses for group presentations to be undertaken in threes or fours, and so inhibit 'free-riding', where one individual unfairly relies on other group members to do most of the work². This can also be avoided by allocating clear responsibilities across a group. Thus if only one member of a group is to do the presenting or voice-over, the other members are usually expected to take on specific roles — e.g. drafting the script (for a talk) or the storyboard (for a video), compiling the text or the graphics for the slides or visuals, devising a handout. In some instances — provided the time-limit set is long enough — each group member can be asked to co-present.

It may be left to students to form groups of their own choosing, or the teacher may decide. Teachers often see synergy in a mix of subject areas and cultural backgrounds.

What's the audience for the presentations?

A distinctive advantage of presentations is that they are done before an audience, usually made up of the teacher and other students. This has the effect of putting students' work on open display (not the usual practice for written assignments, though it may be feasible and worthwhile). It is therefore an opportunity for all the students present to learn from one another, not only with respect to the subject-matter but also in terms of strategies for presenting effectively. This is illustrated in figure 2, taken from an interview-based study of student presentations in three Scottish universities (Hounsell and McCune, 2001). The extracts show how students could broaden their grasp of presenting effectively by observing one another — a valuable complement to feedback on their presentations from the teacher.

To maximise student engagement with (and thus learning from) their peers' presentations, it is generally considered worthwhile to give them a clearly defined role as audience members. In one Common Core course, the student-listeners are expected to take notes of the presentations and they

Physical sciences

Student 1 [to Student 2]: "You've got hands when you're presenting, it's so good."

Student 2: "I was noticing that when I was doing it."

Student 1: "You used your hands when you were talking about the Northern and the Southern Hemisphere, and it was great because then you don't actually have to give all the details. Like a diagram, you can point to bits."

Social sciences

Student A: "Someone [Student B] gave a list of questions that they were going to ask at the beginning and that they went through. I didn't do that, but I think it's a really good idea ..."

Humanities

Student G: "I think it helps if you follow a structure. Like [lecturer X] always tells you what he's going to say more or less and then elaborates on all the points, which I think is really good for notetaking..."

Figure 2

are subsequently assessed on these. In another, a sub-sample of students is asked to write down what they can recall of each presentation immediately afterwards, and this then feeds into the teachers' evaluation of its effectiveness in communicating the subject-matter. In a third, audience members are expected to put questions and comments to presenters, and are graded on this, while in a fourth instance, students are assessed on their individual critiques of poster presentations.

A further possibility is invite student audience-members to give peer feedback to presenters, e.g. by writing down on a slip of paper a strength of the talk, poster or video presentation, alongside a suggestion on how to enhance similar presentations in the future.

When and where do the presentations take place?

Two contrasting approaches to venue and timing can be identified. One is to confine the presentations to the tutorial group concerned, in which case they can be scheduled in class-time, over the semester or clustered at the end. A second is to open them up to a wider group of course members, which then usually means finding a large enough venue and a slot at the weekend or on weekday evenings to avoid timetable clashes.

² For a fuller discussion of free-riding and how it can be minimised see the Wise Assessment Briefing on Assessing Groupwork

³ For examples of rubrics and level descriptors, follow the links in the Case Examples pages.

Who assesses, and how?

In one of the Common Core courses surveyed, 5% of the overall grade was derived from peer evaluations of presentations, while 15% came from the teachers. In the remaining courses in our sample, presentations were assessed by the lecturer or tutor (often by both), and invariably with the aid of a tailor-made or suitably adapted rubric, marking template or set of level descriptors³. Using a reference-point of this kind has the signal advantage of helping to achieve consistency across several markers. Equally beneficially, it helps students to gain a grasp of what's expected of them and how their presentations will be evaluated.

Rubrics for assessing presentations take various forms, but typically include criteria for evaluating both the content of a presentation and of its quality in terms of effective communication of that content. Where Q&A is an integral part of the specification for presentations, it can form part of the process of assessing individuals and awarding grades, in some courses; in others, students can gain bonus marks by putting thoughtful questions to presenters.

Grades and groups

When presentations are by groups, the inescapable question arises: to whom is the grade to be given? In most of the Common Core courses sampled, the members of a presenting group all receive the same grade. Where students voice concerns about this practice, the response is generally that learning to collaborate effectively in a group is a routine expectation in workplace and social settings, as is being jointly evaluated for the quality of what one's team or group collectively produces. In any event, these courses usually make some provision for follow-up by teachers in those cases – few, in the experience of our informants – where free-riding has become a significant problem in a presenting group.

Grades and individuals

In some Common Core courses, there is an individual as well as a group grade associated with presentations. In one instance, each student is marked on the quality of their evaluative comments on other groups' poster presentations. In a second, each audience-member completes an individual reflective evaluation of the group presentations. In a third, each student is also graded on a written justification of their own position or perspective on the issue explored in the group video presentation.

What guidance and feedback are given?

Guidance and feedback generally begins with an initial briefing to students about expectations for the presentation. Since this may be an unfamiliar kind of assignment for most students, they are usually introduced to the rubric or level descriptor used in the assessment (c.f. Kerby & Romine, 2009), while also being given access to exemplars of past presentations where these are readily accessible (e.g. a video or poster presentation, or a videorecording of a talk). Several informants underscored the importance of giving multiple examples, and at different levels of quality, in order to nurture students' evaluative skills and avoid unreflective emulation of a single 'model answer'.

In most courses, teachers also see it as crucial to give ongoing guidance or scaffolding (Doherty et al. 2011) while students are preparing for their presentations, on the principle that 'it is better to intervene early', as one informant put it. This helps to ensure that the topic stays within manageable bounds, and that technical considerations are not a hindrance. Where more substantial presentations are concerned, students submit an outline and get feedforward comments.

Once a presentation has been given, students are given feedback by the teacher. Where the presentation is followed by a later report, students are expected to demonstrate that they have addressed the comments made on the presentation.

References

For full bibliographical details of sources cited, see the pages 'Case Examples from Elsewhere'

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