Ten Years of Using Presentations at a Student Conference as a Final Assessment

NICK LUND
Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

The final assessment for all psychology courses in the department of interdisciplinary studies, MMU Cheshire programmes, in the past 10 years has been a presentation of project work at an undergraduate conference. It is argued that this acts as an ‘authentic’ assessment method which helps prepare students for future experiences. Alumni who commented on their experience of the assessment noted an increased confidence in their presentation skills, communication skills, pride in their research, and a sense of professionalism. In general it was viewed retrospectively as a valuable learning experience and social event.

Introduction and Background
The UK government has recently identified the improvement to teaching, assessment and feedback as being one of the key challenges to its reforms of higher education (HE) in England (BIS, 2011). In a report on teaching quality the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education in the UK found problems, not in teaching and learning generally, but in assessment practices (QAA, 2003). The QAA was critical of the narrow range of assessment and an over-dependence on examinations in the HE sector. The role, value and quality of assessment in higher education (HE) have been the subject of much debate in the past decade. Boud (2000) suggested that the assessment practices in HE focus on the short-term needs of feedback on achievement and of certification rather than equipping students for their future needs, and argued that assessment practices should be judged on whether they equip students to assess their own learning over their lifetime. Similarly Boud and Falchikov (2006) argue that any short-term focus should be balanced against a longer-term emphasis on assessment that fosters future learning after graduation. They suggest that the ‘raison d’être of a higher education is that it provides a foundation on which a lifetime of learning in work and other social settings can be built’. To do this, they argue, students need assessment that is like the kinds found in life and work; highly contextualized. The authors of the Higher Education Academy report ‘A Marked Improvement’ (2012) point out that most assessment practices in UK universities have not changed to equip students for the skills they need or for employability. They point out that:

As increasing numbers of students enter higher education with the primary hope of finding employment, there is a pressure to ensure that assessment can, at least in part, mirror the demands of the workplace or lead to skills that are relevant for a range of ‘real world’ activities beyond education, but this has been largely unreflected in the reform of assessment within many disciplines. (Higher Education Academy, 2012)

The QAA has developed a series of benchmarks which include the key skills, both subject-specific and generic, that graduates should demonstrate (see, for example, the Psychology benchmarks...
Nick Lund

However, Banister (2004) points out that, although these key skills are seen as essential, they are not formally assessed in many courses. He points out that ‘traditional assessment in psychology has involved examinations, some essays, some statistics, some practicals and an empirical dissertation’. In an evaluation of the two most common methods, essays and examinations, Banister notes that neither provides much in the way of transferable skills to the world of work, and explores some alternative methods that might be better suited to developing these skills, such as group work and poster presentations. MacAndrew and Edwards (2003) also call for assessment to move beyond the use of essays and examinations to more ‘authentic’ assessments which they define as those that ‘resemble the tasks that graduates will be required to perform in the workplace’ and investigate the use of poster presentations and production of information leaflets as alternatives. They compare theses to the use of essays and concluded that authentic assessments are ‘valid, reliable, fulfilling and capable of motivating students to achieve’. Kenkel and Peterson (2010) argue there is a need to move to competency-based education to develop psychology as a profession. However, they note that while there is a growing body of research into the identification and definition of the competencies which are essential to professional psychology, there is much less on how to teach or assess them.

One of the key generic skills identified by the QAA (2010) psychology benchmarks is the ability to communicate effectively both in writing and orally. The ability to present information clearly and to answer questions about it is a key skill in many professions. One way of developing this skill is by asking students to do oral presentations in their course. There has been some research on the effectiveness of oral presentations as an assessment method in psychology. For example, Sander, Sanders and Stevenson (2002) found that students found the prospect of presentations stressful but were more favourable when reflecting back on them. Similarly Sander and Sanders (2003) found that students were more positive about presentations after they had done them and that they reported increased levels of confidence. However, there is very little research into the use of presentations at a conference for assessment of undergraduate students. One of few was reported by Zeedyk (2003) who used a conference which aimed to give final-year psychology students from a number of Scottish universities the opportunity to present their dissertation work to peers, staff and family. The format was like that of a professional conference with parallel sessions of 20-minute slots chaired by staff. Zeedyk noted that students placed high value on the experience and the confidence they had gained from it.

This is a report on the experience of using a presentation at a conference for final-year students over a number of years. However, in this case the presentation was not a voluntary experience but acted as an assessment for the course. The aim of using the presentation in this way was to provide an authentic assessment that fosters a key skill for psychology graduates.

Implementation

In the past 10 years the final assessment for all psychology courses in the department of interdisciplinary studies, MMU Cheshire programmes has been student presentations at an undergraduate conference. The conference is designed to mimic the format and atmosphere of a professional conference. It starts with an address from the head of department followed by keynote address. Typically the keynote speaker is one of our alumni who has done a postgraduate course and is at the start of their career in psychology. The student presentations are run in two parallel sessions, each chaired by a member of the psychology staff. All the final-year students are required to attend the whole conference (but are free to attend either of the parallel sessions) and act as the audience for each other. The students present a summary of their final-year project, then defend it in a question and answer session in a 15-minute slot. The questions come from both staff and peers. The presentation at the conference accounts for 25% of the mark for the psychology project. As the psychology project contributes 40 out of 120 credits at level 6 it is an important component of the degree. Two members of staff in the audience mark the students’ presentations and ability to answer the subsequent questions using a range of criteria (including content, structure, analysis, clarity and ability to answer questions). The staff can use the full range of marks available although in practice the marks have fallen between 25% and 85%. The timing of the conference is organized for the week following the level 6 (third-year) final examinations. It is therefore not only the last
Using Presentations at a Student Conference as a Final Assessment

assessment but the last formal contact with the staff and peers. In the words of past students ‘the course ends with a bang’!

A pilot study was done to mark the 10th anniversary of the conference. It involved emailing some open-ended questions to some students from various cohorts. It was decided to use simple open-ended questions to explore the alumni’s views rather than adapt an existing questionnaire (such as the Views on Teaching, Learning and Assessment questionnaire used by Sander & Sanders, 2005) because of the lack of research into undergraduate conference presentations. The use of open-ended questions allowed participants the freedom to raise issues and themes that can inform future research.

Discussion

The use of a presentation at an undergraduate conference as a final assessment has a number of benefits. Firstly, the conference presentation seems to be an example of what MacAndrew and Edwards (2003) call an ‘authentic’ assessment method. Our alumni believed they had improved their presentation and debating skills (e.g., comments such as ‘it gave me the tools to be able to talk about academic research with confidence and conviction’, and ‘makes you a more confident speaker talking about a topic’). These skills, which involved the synthesis and evaluation of information, communicating specialist knowledge, debating with peers and defending methods and conclusions, are valuable in the workplace. Thus the assessment not only appraises the student’s competence in presenting complex information but fosters it at the same time. Secondly, the alumni also recognize the benefits of the assessment to future careers and in the development of their sense of professionalism (e.g., ‘it made me be responsible for my own research in a professional way’, and ‘I felt like a real psychologist’). Thirdly, the presentations were seen as valuable method of assessment and, when viewed retrospectively, a popular one (e.g., ‘makes you a more confident speaker talking about a topic’, ‘the conference was an invaluable experience, it most definitely left me with the research bug’). These findings are similar to those of other studies of the use of presentations for assessment. For example, like Sander et al. (2002), our alumni had viewed the prospect of a presentation at the conference with anxiety, but in retrospect regarded it much more positively. Also, as in Sander and Sanders’ (2005) study, our alumni reported an increase in confidence after the presentation. The most common theme to emerge was that it was a valued and useful experience and this chimes with other reports of student conferences (e.g., Zeedyk, 2003). As it was a last chance to see the whole cohort, the final benefit of the conference setting for a final assessment was social. It was a chance to develop another skill which should not be underestimated in the modern workplace, networking (e.g., ‘a nice final event that we as a group could all share and take part in’, ‘an opportunity to say goodbye and share phone numbers’).

However, any evidence we have so far is from relatively few alumni who are still in email contact with the department. This tends to be a largely well-motivated group who have successful careers (e.g., researchers, teachers, clinical psychologists). The degree classes of the alumni who responded were also not representative since all replies were from alumni who had achieved first or upper-second degrees. We are trying to obtain responses from a more representative sample of students from the past 10 cohorts. Even though the staff and the majority of students who have responded regard the presentations at the conference very positively, it is not a positive experience for all students. Most students feel anxious before the presentations and, although nearly all who replied to our questions felt in retrospect that it was nonetheless a useful experience, it is unlikely that those who experienced the most anxiety have responded.

References


Nick Lund


**NICK LUND** is a senior learning and teaching fellow and psychology lecturer. He is a cognitive psychologist and has written a number of textbooks both for HE (*Attention, Language and Thought, Intelligence and Learning*) and for schools and colleges. He has a strong interest in learning and teaching and has presented papers on the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE) for feedback, developing a sense of community using a VLE and the use of student conferences. **Correspondence:** n.lund@mmu.ac.uk

Manuscript received 30 September 2012
Revision accepted for publication 21 February 2013