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Orals ain't orals: How instruction and assessment practices affect delivery choices with prepared student oral presentations

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Abstract

Despite an ostensibly technology-driven society, the ability to communicate orally is still seen as an essential ability for students at school and university, as it is for graduates in the workplace. The need to develop effective oral communication skills is often tied to future work-related tasks. One tangible way that educators have assessed proficiency in this area is through prepared oral presentations. While some use the terms oral communication and oral presentation interchangeably, other writers question the role more formal presentations play in the overall development of oral communication skills. Adding to the discussion, this paper is part of a larger study examining the knowledge and skills students bring into the academy from previous educational experiences. The study examines some of the teaching and assessment methods used in secondary schools to develop oral communication skills through the use of formal oral presentations. Specifically, it will look at assessment models and how these are used as a form of instruction as well as how they contribute to an accurate evaluation of student abilities. The purpose of this paper is to explore key terms and identify tensions between expectations and practice. Placing the emphasis on the 'oral' aspect of this form of communication this paper will particularly look at the 'delivery' element of the process.

Keywords: oral presentation, rhetoric, communication, instruction

Background

For many years I have been involved in marking prepared oral presentations at both the secondary school and university level. During this time I have written the following line, or used similar wording, on numerous criteria sheets: *You will make more of a connection with your audience if you speak your thoughts rather than read your words.* The reference to speaking thoughts rather than reading words infers that oral presentations should be spoken extemporaneously not simply read. This is in keeping with what the literature says about effective delivery, that it is "spontaneous, natural and conversational" (Sprague and Stuart, 2005; Morreale and Bovee 1998; Mackay, 1995; Sellnow, 2005). In recent years I have started to question what this comment means in light of what students are being asked to do.

The research questions underpinning this research include:

1. What is meant by the term 'oral' in prepared oral presentations?

2. What instructions do students receive on how to present 'orally'?

3. How do current assessment practices encourage students to develop a 'spontaneous, natural and conversational' style?

4. In relation to final delivery, how are oral skills being assessed?

There is an abundance of resources dealing with how to prepare and present oral presentations. The internet, in particular, provides a large number of sites dealing with this subject, many originating from universities or other education-related organisations. A consistent message from these resources encourages students to plan thoroughly, but not be overcommitted to a script; in other words, the exact choice of words should be made at the time of delivery. While such advice is readily available, my research findings suggest that most students prefer to read or memorise their speeches. And further, evidence suggests that the criteria used to assess such presentations provide little assistance in how to deliver a prepared presentation. Instead, an analysis of criteria reference sheets and student feedback suggests that the main concern is in trying to quantify and separate the actual skills needed for effective oral presentation. My larger study explores the students' perspective in relation to how they deliver a prepared classroom oral presentation. While drawing on the literature to inform this project, my actual research deploys qualitative methods, in particular observation and interviewing. I believe the results of this research will be useful for educators involved in implementing and assessing prepared oral presentations for assessment.

Theoretical Framework

Rhetoric provides historical significance when investigating oral communication. In particular it has a strong link to educational practices dating from the early Greeks where it was seen as a "powerful force" (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990, p. 1) in matters of legal, political and ceremonial affairs. The very nature of these speaking opportunities coupled with an emphasis on civic responsibility meant those able to speak out[1] were required to do so in a convincing manner. This led Aristotle to refer to rhetoric as: "The faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion" (as cited in Booth, 2004, p.5). The Roman philosopher Cicero also highlighted the persuasive nature of rhetoric describing it as one great art comprised of five lesser arts: invention, disposition, elocution, memoria, [memory] and pronunciatio [delivery] (as cited in Booth, 2004, p. 5).

The scope of Rhetoric has changed, reduced, expanded and, essentially, reincarnated over the years. Today, distinctions are often made between what is termed 'classical rhetoric' and a broader understanding that places "virtually all forms of discourse and symbolic communication" (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990, p. 2) under a rhetorical banner. But to simply relegate classical rhetoric to the ability to speak well is a misrepresentation of the extremely important and ongoing contribution of this period. As Bizzell and Herzberg (1990) state, these early scholars explored the complex connection between "language" and "knowledge" which has remained a central academic concern (p. 2).

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[1] As McCroskey (2001) points out those able to speak in such arenas were restricted in terms of gender and class, essentially limiting the "theories of rhetoric" to a "very small proportion of the people in society" (p. 17).

The connection between language, knowledge and speech is a fundamental consideration of this study. In particular it provides a way of positioning the term public speaking not as a heightened, competitive or even artificial form of speaking but what students are being required to do each time they deliver a prepared oral presentation. Over the centuries, rhetoric has often been relegated to issues of style over substance. Such terms as 'ornamental'[2], 'cosmetic'[3] or even 'showy' have been used in reference to rhetoric. In particular, Cicero's canon of delivery became synonymous with "effective gestures and vocal modulation" (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1990, pp. 4-5). While this definition is part of the delivery process it fails to connect how something is said to what is actually said. This concern is also apparent with prepared oral presentations for assessment when judgements on an overall presentation are divided into knowledge of the subject matter and the public speaking skills used to deliver it. It does not take into consideration the knowledge that is needed about effective speaking to be able to make decisions concerning how best to deliver a message to an audience.

It is with this in mind that I approach matters of assessment. Chohan and Smith (2007) define oral assessment as: "the process of assessing a person's oral presentation style and their ability to support their arguments/opinions effectively through the use of spoken communication" (p. 1). Following a similar line, Joughin (2003) suggests that there are "two different kinds of qualities that can be measured by oral assessment" (p. 2).

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[2]Burton (2007) suggests that while the term "ornament" may be interrupted as "superficial" or mere "decoration" the Latin root of the word is "ornare" meaning "to equip" thus making "the ornaments of rhetoric. . . the equipment required to achieve the intended meaning or effect" (Content/form, para. 8).

[3] How Plato described the art of rhetoric.

Joughin (2003) lists these as:

- The command of the oral medium itself, that is, the student's oral skills of communication in general or language skills in particular; and

- The command of content as demonstrated through the oral medium (p. 2).

Chohan and Smith and Joughin do not simply divide oral assessment into content and delivery but rather propose that part of the assessment process involves evaluating a student's ability to orally make a message. The 'content or 'argument' of a student's presentation is 'supported' or 'demonstrated' through 'spoken communication' ('oral medium'). Dance (2002) explores this idea further suggesting that instead of limiting discussion to content and delivery it is more important to concentrate on a speaker's thoughts and how these thoughts are expressed. Seven years ago Dance criticized many North American university public speaking courses as only focusing on public speaking skills (2002, p. 355). He questions teaching such skills when the main indicator of success is how well the student performs during the final presentation. Dance (2002) favours an approach where a student's ability to apply critical thinking is evidenced through overall development in public speaking skills. His comments are particularly directed towards assessment considerations: "It is easier to critique eye contact than to isolate and critique logical strength. It is easier to reduce vocalized pauses than to maximize a regard for evidence appropriate to the subject and audience" (Dance, 2002, p. 357).

Dance (2002) focuses on the importance of "reasoning" and how at the end of a presentation an audience "must have been able to follow and to understand the speaker's reasoning" (p. 356).

While specifically dealing with North American universities, his comments have something to offer this study. In relation to secondary school and university student presentations, how much importance is placed on assessing what can be traditionally described as public speaking skills? In addition, if as Dance (2002) suggests the goal is for overall improvement in the ability to speak one's thoughts, then what mechanisms are in place to facilitate this development? In other words, is it enough to simply provide opportunity to present? And how does the feedback that a student receives encourage or change the way they approach the task the next time?

Dance raises important macro level concerns for this study; in particular pedagogical issues related to instruction and assessment. In focussing more on actual assessment practices, Joughin (2003) identifies six dimensions of oral assessment that assist in "describing" and "analysing" what students are being asked to do with this type of assessment (p. iv). It is the last dimension – orality – that is of particular interest for this study. Joughin (2003) refers to this as the "extent to which the assessment is conducted orally" and in terms of this identifies a "range of practices" that can be placed along a continuum (p. 26). At one end the "purely oral" where "the oral medium is deliberately substituted for the written" while at the other end "orality as secondary" where the "oral component of assessment may be secondary to another component" (p. 26). To the first, Joughin (2003) assigns such assessment items as the *viva voce,* which is usually conducted through a question/answer format or discussion. With "orality as secondary" he identifies such tasks as the "oral presentation of a written paper" or the "oral explanation of a physical work" (p. 26).

The common element, regardless of where a presentation fits along the continuum, is that this type of assessment has an oral component. What constitutes an oral response is a key concern for this study. In particular, orality will be looked at in terms of use of, and overall reliance on, a written script. In exploring a range of practices in this area, commitment to a script will be considered regardless of whether an actual copy is taken out at the time of delivery, i.e. has a complete script been memorised or reduced to dot points but still presented/recited in full. The reason this will be investigated is to consider what is actually meant by the word 'oral' in oral presentation? And if it can be substituted for reading or reciting, how should such presentations be marked?

Oral communication

As highlighted earlier, the need to develop effective oral communication skills is a common theme across the education literature. For Young and Travis (2004) it will enable us "to move through life with self-confidence and a feeling of accomplishment" (p. 3) while Jackie Manuel (2004) takes it further by suggesting that such skills will enable us to become "co-creators of the world" (p. 73). She lists a number of desirable traits that will be gained including the ability to "think, reflect and articulate experience" (p. 73). At its most basic level oral communication can be described as the "effective expression of thoughts, feelings, and ideas in oral form" suggests Green River Community College (2005, para. 1). This very general definition allows for numerous speaking opportunities to be considered when looking at the need to develop effective oral skills, from small group discussions to speaking in front of many.

In recent years, lists of essential graduate capabilities for future employment have included the need for good communication skills (both written and oral). These lists are often presented as evidence why such skills need to be developed. The list of potential work-related activities are diverse, from formal presentations to participating in teams (Crosling and Ward, 2002) to attending job interviews, chairing meetings and speaking at seminars (Van Emden and Becker, 2004). Knight and Yorke (2006) sum it up by stating that "oral communication is considered to be a core aspect of employability" (cited in Chohan and Smith, 2007 p. 1). The benefits of effective oral communication skills are not just limited to employment; many writers extend relevance to "personal" situations as well (Levin and Topping, 2006, Sprague and Stuart 2005, Abbott and Godinho, 2001).

This reference to professional and personal lives also takes into consideration the importance of effective oral skills when addressing a range of audiences (UNSW, 2008, Griffith University, 2007). As Young and Travis (2004) state such skills are not just needed in more public communication but at the interpersonal level as well. As one university oral communication resource guide states: "interpersonal communication involves interacting effectively with others to achieve a particular outcome" (UNSW, 2008). The notion of achieving a particular outcome is in line with the rhetorical perspective of oral communication, that of being persuasive. McCarthy and Hatcher's (2002) view is that "most speaking opportunities have persuasive intentions" and that speakers must make intentional choices about how they will present their ideas as well as what they will present (p. 2). This relates to both one-on-one exchanges as well as more formal situations, such as prepared oral presentations.

From the literature, it is evident that effective oral communication is seen as a 'life-long' skill that will benefit students both personally and professionally in a diverse range of contexts.

The concern with providing a general definition of oral communication is that it can lead to an oversimplification of the specific nature and requirements of each speaking opportunity. Can simply subscribing to a view that all oral communication must be 'effective' assist in developing students who are able to make a positive impression at an up-coming job interview as well as deliver a 10-minute speech? Oral communication is an extremely rich and diverse area of study. The body of knowledge that is available dates back thousands of years. To cope with such a wealth of information, summaries are often made. However, much meaning can be lost if ideas are reduced too far. A 'conversational quality' may indeed be recommended for both small group discussion and more public speech, but although both involve oral communication they offer very different challenges for the speaker.

This study is concerned with the more formal end of the spectrum, that of giving a prepared oral presentation. For this, I draw on Levin and Topping's (2006) broad definition of oral presentation: "a talk or speech given by a presenter (sometimes more than one) to an audience of two or more people" (p. 4). I have extended their definition to include a planned talk ranging in time from three to 15 minutes because this reflects what students are generally required to do at secondary school and university.

Positioning oral presentation

What is the relationship between oral communication and oral presentation? Are the two terms interchangeable or is one dependent on the other. Quin and Cody (1998) see a "valuable spinoff" with regard to overall skills and confidence when stating why experience in more formal speaking opportunities will benefit less formal ones (p.54). Levin and Topping (2006) also refer to generic skills and confidence that cross over from public speaking to other less academic occasions. They believe that at the core of any speaking situation is the need to "say what you want, clearly and persuasively" (p. 1). Simple adages such as this are scattered throughout the literature. Dale Carnegie's maxim "tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you've told them" is often quoted in books and articles dealing with speaking in front of others (as cited in Sellnow, 2005, p. 185; Levin & Topping, 2006, p. 59; McKenna, Thomas & Waddell, 2004, p. 341). This 17-word speaking motto follows (in both style and message) a simple structure, uses simple language and employs the rhetorical device of repetition. It is this straightforward approach that enables Quin and Cody to make the leap from more formal student oral presentations to improving "skills and confidence in less formal situations as well" (1998, p. 54). Keep it simple, keep it conversational and any message will be clear. But is what we're asking students to do quite as simple?

It is not uncommon to find example speeches located in educational support books. The idea is to provide students with one way a speech could be constructed. However, even when prefaced by the word 'sample' it is fair to assume that the suggested model is seen as an effective way to approach the task.

In one Australian English support book for senior secondary students, an analysis of the first fifteen lines of a sample speech reveals an average sentence length of just over thirty words. The longest sentence is forty-six words. This is in contrast to recommendations cited in public speaking and presentation manuals that suggest using much shorter sentences (Levin and Topping, 2006, p. 87); conversational language (Ryan and Pauley, 2000, p. 5); and writing for the ear rather than the eye (McKenna, Thomas and Waddell, 2004, p. 319). The information contained in this sample speech does not follow Carnegie's maxim but rather provides an in-depth commentary on a complicated topic that is more suitable for a written assignment than an oral presentation.

How would such a speech be delivered? The three recognised modes of delivery for prepared speeches are memorized, manuscript and extemporaneous (Sprague and Stuart, 2005; Morreale and Bovee 1998; Makay, 1995; Sellnow, 2005). The first two approaches refer to writing out a speech in full and either committing it to memory or actually using the script during delivery. While accepting that some situations require such a controlled message, both approaches are generally not recommended. Thompson (1998) provides the following summary: "Memorising gets too much in the way of spontaneity, but then few speakers can handle a written text" (pp. 127-128). General public speaking and presentation manuals support the third option, the extemporaneous method, as best practice. With this method, the oral presentation is planned and rehearsed but not committed to memory or read directly from a script. As Bradley (1991) states "you'll make the exact choice of words and construction of sentences largely during the act of communicating directly with your listeners" (p.117).

Why is this most favoured mode? The literature I canvassed repeatedly referred to three words in support of the extemporaneous approach: spontaneous, natural and conversational (Sprague and Stuart, 2005; Morreale and Bovee 1998; Makay, 1995; Sellnow, 2005). All three are seen as positive attributes in helping to develop and maintain a 'connection' with the audience. A number of writers refer to the extemporaneous mode as the most common approach to speaking (Sprague and Stuart, 2005, p. 335; Morreale and Bovee, 1998; Lahiff and Penrose, 1997). Verderber and Verderber (2006) go one step further in stating that it is in fact the "easiest to give effectively" (p. 201). While McCarthy and Hatcher also advocate the extemporaneous approach, favouring a speaking outline over a written script, their focus is on the need for thorough planning and that less detailed notes will only be possible once the speaker has "become practised at outlining prompts or points" (p. 63). This means much more than simply reducing the number of words on a page. This relates to the overall purpose of the presentation, in particular what can be achieved in the context and time available.

Are students encouraged to use the extemporaneous mode? My research suggests that most students are in fact unaware of this term, however, when criteria sheets include references to overall pace, phrasing, pausing for emphasis and eye contact; students are being encouraged to make both an oral and non-verbal connection with the audience rather than simply reading aloud a written assignment. While reference to a written script does not support the extemporaneous mode of delivery, it is not surprising considering that for many secondary school students a written copy of a speech is to be submitted[4] at the time of delivery.

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[4]The Queensland Senior English Syllabus refers to prepared oral presentations as spoken/signed tasks. The syllabus states 12 "task conditions" that need to be observed when setting these tasks, including "use of lectern, may use written text to support delivery" and "written text or palm cards to be submitted".

How do students make language choices when they are required to hand in a written script? To date, results from my study indicate that written language is indeed privileged with such assessment tasks. And even when the submission of a written script is not required, language used often favours the written mode as the following line from a first-year university student's oral presentation suggests:

> Thus, these developing nations have been left by their dictators to live under a shadow of indebtedness they cannot afford, in a system without recourse to a democratic judicial process, in a poverty trap without end or escape.

Students are presented with a paradox when oral presentation assessment guidelines include lines such as:

> Although spoken, the news report is to be fully scripted.
> Year 7, Brisbane North State School

What constitutes an 'oral response' with such assessment tasks? There is indeed an oral component with both a prepared reading and/or a recitation. However, in terms of bigger picture considerations in relation to oral communication, do such tasks encourage students to 'effectively express thoughts, feelings and ideas'? And if speeches are in fact written first and either read or memorised, does this approach make a clear distinction between content and delivery? Most importantly for this study, what is the impact of such a distinction on the assessment process?

A UNSW oral assessment guide (2003) acknowledges the importance of assessing both content and delivery and that students should be aware of how both will be assessed (including the marks assigned to each). From the same publication, the following quote is provided from a student's perspective:

> At university, there is an emphasis on presenting oral assignments, but you end up being assessed on content rather than on verbal skills (p. 23).

My research also involves interviewing students to gain their perspective on how and why the final delivery of a presentation is approached. From my initial interviews comes this quote from a Year 12 student:

> When we were just about to present, the teacher said she would just be marking what we say not how we say it. I wish we'd been told that before.

This comment privileges content over delivery however the criteria sheet used to assess this presentation includes reference to pronunciation, phrasing and pausing for emphasis, audibility and clarity, volume, pace, facial expressions, gestures, proximity, stance and movement.

There are numerous written resources available on how to present in front of others. In an attempt to simplify instruction in this area, material is often presented in conveniently packaged summaries or series of dot points. Monash, Curtin and Canberra universities are three Australian academies that provide online advice on how to give an oral presentation. While a number of best practice ideas are usually given, a distinction is still made between what to say and how. It's not that the information on how to present is incorrect, but rather that it has been watered-down or reduced so much that it really offers very little. General statements on effective delivery include: *vary your voice quality, maintain eye contact, don't read, show enthusiasm, vary your speed, look relaxed and confident.* Such statements also give an impression that these delivery techniques can be 'added' at the end of the preparation stage.

Criterion-referenced assessment

The importance students place on assessment as it relates to overall curriculum has been well documented (Ramsden, 1992; Murphy, 1996; Cooper, 2005). Students want to know what is being assessed. The introduction of criterion-referenced assessment in both secondary schools and universities provides a comprehensive form of evaluation through the marking rubric. Usually set out in a simple grid format, a rubric consists of a number of criteria that can be used to "discriminate . . . degrees of quality, understanding or proficiency" (Carey, 2001, p. 6). This approach allows both students and markers to understand not only what is required with an assessment item but how marks will be assigned. It is advocated because it "clarifies and demystifies" how tasks are evaluated (Newcastle University, 2008). Therefore, rubrics have two functions: to provide instruction, and for use in final assessment. Another perceived benefit is that rubrics "increase objectivity" (Newcastle University, 2008). They are seen as simple, fast and effective because everyone knows what is expected.

The adoption of criterion-referenced assessment is an Australia wide phenomenon; however some writers remain critical of the approach and the corresponding marking rubric. In particular Popham (1997) questions the instructional value of some rubrics. While Popham (1997) details four specific "flaws", I will draw on one of his concerns which is the "excessively general evaluative criteria" found on some rubrics (p. 73). In particular, I will look at the criteria used to justify specific marks concerning actual delivery of a presentation.

A rubric is made up of three necessary parts: "evaluative criteria, quality definitions and a scoring strategy" (Popham, 1997, p. 72). Levels of achievement are indicated on a sliding scale from 'excellent' to 'poor' or with similar terms.

The number and scope of criteria reflect assessment requirements for that task. As oral presentations involve students actually speaking in front of others, there is usually some reference to both oral and non-verbal factors. In trying to measure or quantify levels of achievement, definitions of quality usually involve "slightly less positive terms" being used from one grade to the next (Popham, 1997, p. 73). For example the following definitions of quality are used to assess body language on one Queensland primary school rubric:

A	B	C	D	E
Presents imaginative use of body position stance actions eye contact	Presents effective use of body position stance actions eye contact	Presents use of body position stance actions eye contact	Some use of body position stance actions eye contact	Maintains inconsistent use of body position stance actions eye contact

While for a university group presentation, these comments appear within the criterion for *oral communication processes:*

High Distinction	Distinction	Credit	Pass/Low Pass	Fail/Low Fail
Exceptionally clear and concise expression	Excellent expression	Good expression	Sound/limited expression	Poor/incoherent expression

What is the difference between 'imaginative' and 'effective' eye contact and how does one decide between 'exceptional', 'excellent' or 'good' expression? Most importantly, how does this 'clarify and demystify' the marking process and provide 'instructional' help for students? Popham (1997) suggests such comments infer that: "really good student responses to the task are, well, really good. And, of course, really bad student responses are – you guessed it – really bad" (p. 73). While Popham admits this comment contains some hyperbole, it demonstrates the difficulty in trying to 'quantify' oral presentation skills.

The following example, taken precisely as it appears, illustrates this point. Under the criterion *speaks clearly*[5]*,* these measures were included:

4	3	2	1
Speaks clearly and distinctly all (100-95%) the time, and mispronounces no words.	Speaks clearly and distinctly all (100-95%) the time, but mispronounces one word.	Speaks clearly and distinctly most (94-85%) of the time. Mispronounces no more than one word.	Often mumbles or cannot be understood OR mispronounces more than one word.

With a 7-minute presentation, 95% is 6 minutes 39 seconds. Does that mean a student can speak unclearly for 21 seconds and still receive a '4' if he/she doesn't mispronounce a word? I realize the absurdity of this idea however, what is gained from including such percentages?

In the quest to fill in the blanks on a rubric, what messages are being given to students pertaining to actual delivery? The main concern appears to be in providing comments outside the two extremes of 'excellent' and 'poor' where non-descript terms such as 'sometimes', 'usually' 'occasionally' and 'at times' are often used. What does a student take away from the comment: 'sometimes (70-80%) speaks in complete sentences' or 'volume is loud enough to be heard by all audience members at least 80% of the time'.

A particular indicator of a student's oral delivery style is related to use of notes which is often linked to eye contact as with the following criteria from a Canberra private boys' school:

[5]This has been generated by an online rubric maker called Rubistar. This website is mentioned on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria.

	Not evident	Beginning	Developing	Established	Advanced
Notes	No notes used. No obvious planning	Reads directly out of book or off notes	Use palm cards, but reads them directly	Good use of palm cards, some direct reading	Excellent use of palm cards as reference only
Eye contact	No eye contact with audience	Displayed minimal eye contact with audience	Some use of eye contact with audience	Consistent use of direct eye contact with audience	Holds attention of entire audience with the use of direct eye contact.

With this example, the absence of notes is a negative and points to lack of planning but with other criteria sheets limited use of notes is seen as positive, an indication that the student is thoroughly prepared.

With the extemporaneous approach, some form of written prompt is advised. The generic name given to such prompts is speaking (or speaker) notes. The very use of the word 'notes' implies some degree of brevity and again this supports the extemporaneous method of delivery. If the speaker is thoroughly prepared then it will simply be a matter of needing a few memory joggers or key headings to keep on track. While there is a general acceptance that notes should in fact remain as notes, the literature varies on the overall size, placement and use.

With student presentations, maintaining 'excellent eye contact' is directly related to how frequently the student refers to his or her notes. With my larger study, I am investigating how students interpret the information they are given both before and after presenting. One Year 9 student offered the following comment:

> On one of my recent orals, I got an A for it and the only thing the teacher said that I could have improved was if I had memorised it. I only looked at the palm cards once or twice but, if I hadn't had any and knew it off by heart that would have got me the A+. That's what I'm going to do for the future.

But in relation to speaking notes, this student preferred to take out the whole script:

> I tend to because I feel there is more room for error if you just have dot points. You can practice something but then just get to the day and forget that dot point .That can just cause you extra stress whereas if you have the whole thing – I think it's much easier.

While my larger study will explore student responses in more depth, for this paper it is interesting to consider what is meant by: 'I only looked at my palm cards once or twice' and ' there is more room for error if you just have dot points.' Is a perceived requirement of prepared oral presentations to be word perfect? If we start quantifying 'umms' and 'ahhs' or infer that the best presentations are given without any reference to notes, isn't it more likely that students will attempt to memorise their talk or speech?

This idea of 'speaking perfectly' is linked to the broader discussion of content and delivery. For one year 12 student, the approach is to work on them separately:

> I concentrate on my content when I'm planning and writing it and then when I go and practice the speech, I've written it and I know it, then I'll add things such as facial expressions, pronunciation, hand movements and stuff like that. I'll add that in after I've written it so I can concentrate on different things at different times.

It is not the aim of this paper to question the place of prepared oral presentations for assessment but rather to highlight some of the tensions that exist. The secondary students that I have interviewed to date have all referred to future work or university commitments as a reason why they are required to give oral presentations at school. This supports the idea that oral communication is a life-long skill. However Barrass (2006) still laments that many high school leavers enter university without adequate written and oral communication skills (p. 1). Levin and Topping (2006) agree that confident speaking skills will "last you a lifetime" (p. 1).

However, they, too, criticize what is taught in higher education in relation to these all-important skills. Abbott and Godinho also suggest that basic skills in oral communication are overlooked because "priority is given to the written mode" (p.vi). They single out an "overcrowded curriculum" as a main reason for this (p.vi).

This is a crucial point. To simply suggest that more time should be invested in the teaching of basic skills or in finding alternative assessment options is also fraught with challenges. While both these ideas are worthy of future research, the purpose of this paper is to specifically look at what is happening in many secondary schools and universities where students are called upon to present a prepared piece orally. Does the instruction and assessment of these pieces meet the overall expectation of including them in the first place?

I believe this is the central question to be asked before designing any form of prepared oral assessment. In no way am I suggesting that this form of assessment is not warranted and unlike Manuell, believe that students will have many opportunities to 'present publicly' in the future. However, I do not support Quin and Cody's notion that the prepared presentations that many of our students are required to do will in fact benefit 'less formal situations' as well. In particular, I question what many of our criteria-referenced assessment rubrics offer students in terms of 'instruction' on delivery. Pickford and Brown (2006) offer a radical idea on this, suggesting:

> If we accept that the best presentations are so engaging that we do not consciously register the presenter's skills, then how can we validly assess these transparent skills? (p. 59)

This quote deserves more consideration but at this stage I offer the following rewrite:

> If we accept that overall presentations should be engaging, how can we compartmentalize and prioritize the various skills required?

Conclusion

Oral presentations offer a unique assessment opportunity. There are a number of skills involved including researching, analysing material, planning, organizing and delivering. While I have purposely omitted the word 'writing' for most students this is also a skill associated with oral presentations – writing a script. I am half way through my research study on how students deliver prepared oral presentations. Current findings indicate that students write a script and either memorise or read it. My initial research also suggests that students are unaware of the term 'extemporaneous' as a mode of delivery. However, even if this term is not used directly, criteria used to instruct and assess prepared oral presentations favour this more engaging presentational style. Modulative devices such as pitch, pace pause, volume, intonation and emphasis are often mentioned as a way of evaluating effective delivery with degrees of proficiency ranging between 'outstandingly appropriate use of voice' to 'poor use of voice'. The importance of making a 'connection' with the audience is also highlighted. For example general 'enthusiasm' for the oral presentation is seen as very effective if 'facial expression and body language generate a strong interest and enthusiasm about the topic in others'. The difficulty rests in how students interpret comments such as 'outstandingly appropriate use of voice' as well as how best to use facial expression and body language to create audience interest. Can such delivery techniques be 'added' to a written script?

Extemporaneous speaking requires much more than simply reducing a full script to dot points. This type of speaking requires a specific connection between content and delivery. While some writers believe it is the 'easiest' mode, I believe it is the most sophisticated method of delivering a prepared oral presentation. Simply giving students more and more opportunities to present in front of classmates does not automatically increase the ability to speak extemporaneously. The connection between a written script and the oral delivery of this written script requires further investigation. At this stage of my research project, I believe it is right to question feedback comments such as: *You will make more of a connection with your audience if you speak your thoughts rather than read your words.* With prepared oral presentations for assessment, students face extremely tight time restrictions, often complicated topics and overall limited instruction on how to present.

In addition to this, and what this paper has identified, assessments guidelines, especially marking rubrics, offer very prescribed yet often ambiguous ideas concerning effective delivery. I believe the current environment encourages students to strive for a word-perfect approach to oral presentations, hence favouring a memorised or manuscript mode of delivery? It is not the purpose of this paper, or indeed my larger study, to directly criticize these approaches but rather to identify tensions that exist between what students are being asked to do and why. If prepared oral presentations are to contribute to life-long oral communication skills, then those implementing and marking them need to be very clear about how such skills are developed. In addition, there must be consideration of the students' perspective. It can then be decided if in fact expectations are meeting practice.

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