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Title

An account of research into the anxiety pupils and students may experience when answering questions and presenting in whole class contexts, with a focus on the coping strategies the learners may employ.

Introduction

On reading John Holt's book *How Children Fail* in the 1990s when still working full time as a school teacher of Year 5 pupils, I was taken aback by his description of the fear and anxiety pupils told him they felt when being asked questions in his classroom. He came over as a caring, supportive teacher - so why were the children so nervous? So began work on an issue that has occupied me ever since and taken me from working with Year 5 school children in a NW England school - to Masters students at the University of Bristol. A very different group of learners and yet, as it turned out, sharing much the same experience.

"Pretty scary" was the response from a year 4 (8/9 years old) pupil in a school in North West England when I asked her how she felt when a teacher asked her a question in class.

I was talking to her as part of what became my doctoral research into how primary pupils perceive answering questions in front of their peers and teachers and her response was typical. What I also found in that particular study was that not only did almost every pupil in her mixed ability classroom find answering questions stressful to some extent, they were also commonly employing coping strategies that were both sophisticated and subtle. My concern was that this could not be enhancing their learning.

Moving into Higher Education (HE) and in particular teaching on a Master's degree module on an Education programme where we expected students to do a non assessed presentation as part of their course, I wondered if students experienced anxiety too – and if so whether it was experienced any differently to the school pupils I had talked to.

Furmark states that social anxiety is common, studies concluding that it is the third most common mental health problem (Furmark, 2002). It is also linked to poor attainment in school(Stein et al, 1999). It creates difficulties for pupils and students because it typically affects memory and concentration adversely (Wells and Matthews, 1994), both important attributes for effective learning. I therefore started to expect the students to, similar to their younger counterparts, also say that they experienced anxiety in speaking and presentation learning environments.

For the purposes of this short paper I am grouping social anxiety, audience anxiety, presentation anxiety and communication apprehension together as the literature suggests that there is much that is common to all. Russell notes that the literature also refers to social phobia and social anxiety disorder (Russell, 2006). I am not

1

attempting to examine any variations here because the main issue that I am concerned with is of anxiety relating to learning – and speaking out/ presenting in general – as well as the issue of scale. Nor am I concerned here primarily with the student who has a recognised mental health issue relating to anxiety although I acknowledge that it exists as does the pupils or student who seems to be particularly lacking in confidence and / or self esteem and is especially affected by anxiety in the classroom. Any teacher is likely to be familiar with the matter of having a particularly shy or anxious student in their classes. My small scale studies both in schools and within HE have suggested that large numbers if not the majority of pupils and students are affected by some sort of anxiety when presenting work or talking aloud as part of their courses. Having to speak out in front of their peers and teachers/ lecturers and tutors seems to be stressful for so many that they commonly use avoidance strategies and coping mechanisms to manage the situation. Such strategies used large scale I suggest may inhibit learning on a large scale too.

In this paper I therefore focus on what the pupils and students have stated these strategies may be, what more experienced students may have learnt to use and what we as teachers, lecturers and tutors can therefore do to help students and pupils overall to manage the challenge of speaking in classes and undertaking effective presentations. Although most admitted to finding presenting quite challenging, most also accepted that it was a useful and desirable component of their learning if used carefully within courses. In addition, the employability literature typically records that employers rate all forms of communication skills highly (Radloff, 1995) and therefore that graduates who are effective communicators are not only likely to get the jobs they want but also gain promotion and be successful within their chosen careers.

Literature context

A H Buss developed a theory of audience anxiety in which he argues that it is most closely linked to feelings of self – consciousness in the speaker as well as relating to issues around the audience and how the speaker perceives audience reception. Buss also suggested that an important factor is how used the speaker is to speaking in front of an audience.

Buss breaks down the feelings of anxiety into three key times. The first he suggests occurs between days to just moments before the public speaking event and this he calls evaluation anxiety; the second which is what he calls self consciousness happens at the start of the presentation and the third, awareness of the novelty of the event occurs as the speaker considers the audience from their, the speaker's, perspective (Buss, 1980).

J Ortiz (1988) suggests that this theory is useful to us for helping students to overcome their fears of public presentations. He proposes that the theory helps students understand their feelings by contextualising and organising strategies for reducing the feelings of fear and helps the lecturers or teacher by offering strategies for helping students work through their fears including situational analysis, visualisation techniques and relaxation techniques. What I think is particularly important to emphasise again is that these are all approaches suggested for the ordinary student and not the student that has a fear of speaking that is dysfunctional.

Communication apprehension (CA) was defined back in the seventies by McCroskey as an "individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons"(McCroskey, 1977).

CA was described by Holbrook as a "significant problem" at elementary (UK Key Stage 2, Primary)school level with at least eleven per cent of pupils experiencing

severe CA and another twenty per cent experiencing enough anxiety to warrant some form of intervention.

According to Holbrook, CA is more than the typical stage fright experienced in the traditional drama and other formal school settings where a child or student is on show. Instead, Holbook argues that it is a pattern of anxiety, often starting during the elementary school years which can affect much or even all of a pupil or students oral communication, their social skills and then affect their self esteem (Holbrook, H. T. 1987).

According to Friedman, CA may be situational, sometimes "specific to only a few settings" or it may be pervasive, occurring in " most everyday communication situations"(Friedman, 1980). It may otherwise be part of a general anxiety trait. This latter has been studied more than the idea of situation; however research has increasingly focused on both trait and situation (McCroskey, 1977). Others too have seen that many university students suffer from some degree of CA and in the United States in the late Nineties students were asked to complete questionnaires about CA and it was found that using small group learning environments was a factor in decreasing their CA (Crump and Dudley, 1996). There is of course much literature on the effective use of small group work and this paper does not suggest changing methods of teaching to all small group work – but using group work may also be a factor in helping reduce anxiety in learning situations for students that are being invited to do presentations.

Methodology

The focus of the initial main school based research required the observation of groups of children in their 'natural setting' in order to appreciate whether anxiety may be being generated in lessons. It therefore lent itself, at least in part, to the research tradition of the Symbolic Interactionists as exemplified in the work on classroom strategies, perspectives, behaviour and interactions undertaken by researchers such as Hargreaves (1972), Woods (1983, 1986), Hammersley (1990), Rowland (1984) and Pollard (1985, 1996).

Symbolic interactionist theory states that "social participation is made possible as the individual comes to define and respond to his own line of activity from the perspective of others" (Burns, 1982, p. 185). Symbolic interaction can be both verbal and / or non verbal, this approach expounding the view in this instance that children will further develop their sense of 'self' as they act in the social setting of the classroom, responding to the way they understand their words and actions to be 'received' by those around them.

The initial school study also draws on the sociological approach of phenomenology. This, it can be argued, is just in one quite specific way, in as much, as Pollard put it, "that what people experience has a direct and powerful influence on their knowledge and perception of social situations" (Pollard, 1985 p. x).

A key aim of mine throughout the both sets of data collection was to try to present the attitudes and perspectives of the pupils and students as accurately as I could. In this respect I adopted an ethnographic style approach. In that the project had an overall plan but was open to change according to ongoing interpretation of the emergent data, I was further following the ethnographic tradition of "building on the understandings which are gradually developed" (Pollard, op. cit. p. xi) before moving the work on.

The understandings I developed were coloured by my "own assumptions" and affected by my own "role in the research setting" (Connolly 1997, p. 169). Hence there was always a need to remain 'critically reflexive', to aim to know myself and my own preconceptions as well as appreciating that each relationship I had with each of the pupils and students was different.

Mercer (1991, p. 48) says that " only the most naive of researchers would not expect their visible presence as an observer to affect the behaviour of those being observed" However, this need not necessarily be a negative or disruptive influence. Indeed, Pollard claims that using the 'self' of the researcher, the deliberate attempt to establish rapport with the subjects is an "essential means of obtaining data about the subjective meanings of people's lives" (1996 p. 302).

The researcher both in school and at university

For the school study, I spent much time going into the school prior to recording class lessons and interviews in order to become a 'familiar face' and establish rapport. Walford (1991) highlights the value of this: "... I believe that my time spent in classrooms observing contributed vitally to the willingness of the ...children to talk openly with me - without it I would just have been another 'visitor' for whom 'special rules' of conversation operated." (Walford, 1991 p. 96).

The topic of 'anxiety' was potentially sensitive. A concern was that although some children may have been willing to discuss the feelings generated when being questioned by teachers, I suspected the majority would not - or would at best offer me incomplete data. I was convinced therefore that I needed to earn the right to discuss this issue with them.

Taking the time to go to the class regularly also allowed opportunity for the children to raise their own concerns. Rowland says of himself that: " the children saw me as a second teacher, but soon began to ask questions concerning my role. All these I attempted to answer clearly and openly....gradually, several of the children developed a very good idea of the nature of my work and this proved helpful since they would often draw my attention to anything they thought would interest me." (Rowland, 1984 p. 8).

In the university setting I was teaching a seminar group. Over the course of the term we were timetabled together, I discussed my interest and prior work into the issue of anxiety in the classroom - including my own experiences of being a shy and nervous learner at school. All were invited to talk to me about their own experiences both of their current MEd course and prior school and college/ universities. All agreed to participate and unlike the school pupil interviews where I often spoke to the children in twos for just a few minutes, the students all met me individually for interviews that lasted for 20 – 45 minutes.

Data from pupils in Year 4

In the school study, virtually every child I questioned admitted to experiencing some sense of being ill at ease during times of whole class teacher questioning. They implied or said that the response of the teacher is fairly unimportant. The reaction of peers, especially significant peers in relation to that child, mattered more. They also said that although the subject of the lesson is also *relatively* unimportant, with all subjects seeming to carry some risk.

If the child I spoke to was particularly capable or amongst the least able academically, the risk of losing face in front of peers remained similar - although the reason for it may differ. But for the average ability child, the risks were perhaps

greatest. These pupils, by far the majority of the pupils spoken to, seemed to feel most anxious. In the study gender did not arise as an issue of any real significance. I suggest that all the children experienced varying degrees of anxiety about the possibility of losing face / being skitted by peers. The learning identity they had created to date, attitude to school in general and their status within the class were three key areas that seemed to emerge as being important factors in how much this mattered to each of them.

As Covington and Beery put it (1976, p.6), in a society like ours, "a primary determinant of one's status is the ability to perform". They go on to state that children as young as five " …can already identify the brightest and dullest among their peers" (op. cit. p.6). Thus personal identity, especially in terms of learning, is threatened by a failure to perform, especially in front of an audience of peers. And there is little doubt that children aged from 7- 9 as the children in Years 3 and 4 who were worked with for this research, knew all about it. When teachers ask children to do things in front of their peers, there is the possibility of success but also the risk of failure and loss of face or status.

> All too often, research tries to find out if people are 'anxious', then studies relationships between the trait and other traits or performances; but as educators we should be more concerned as to what people do when feeling anxious (Sutherland, 1983, p61).

As Holt had found decades earlier suggested (Holt 1964, 1982 revised) the conclusions from the doctoral work also implied that teacher questioning of pupils in front of their peers leads to an emotional response that may include anxiety, worry and fear and that associated negative feelings, including embarrassment and shame are leading to the pupils employing coping strategies during times of whole class teacher questioning that could adversely affecting their learning.

Data from the university students

Having worked with 8/9-year-old children, I wanted to see if there was also an issue with students and, as referred to above, with ESCalate support, I set up a small-scale study with MEd students. As mentioned above, they were a seminar group and had all worked with me as a group and in smaller groups of four or five doing research projects. At the end of term they presented their projects to the rest of the group in a ten to fifteen minute presentations. It was non-assessed work and no one had to participate in the talk although I encouraged everyone to try. If they really didn't want to they were encouraged to ensure that they contributed to the group's work by other means. In the case of Erin who I will come to later as a short case study, she created an excellent ppt presentation for the group instead of being part of the presentation team.

With the students at the university, being the lecturer or teacher for the group obviously could have created difficulties and has to be borne in mind as I asked the students about how much the person of the lecturer affected their feelings when presenting. However, the positive side of the situation was that being a small group that worked quite intensely together for up to two hours a week together, it had been possible to create a trusting working relationship. I was also open about wanting to invite them each to discuss their feelings about presentations and they knew that the course feedback from them would affect future courses we put on at the university.

For the work I could have used a measurement of social anxiety such as the well known Liebowitz scale but I decided instead to work with the assumption that some measure of anxiety had attended their presentation experience and instead invited them to a one to one interview about presentations These conversations were audio

taped and then transcribed and offered back to each student to verify and if they wished, to add further to their comments. The interviews typically lasted thirty minutes on average with one being as short as twenty minutes and several being forty or more minutes. They were essentially asked just one question which asked them to recall a time when they had had to present in front of an audience and then describe the event. The full question and details are included as Appendix 1. As part of talking about this, I typically asked them to describe how they felt they had changed in this respect since they had been eight or nine thus creating link with the school pupils I had talked to previously.

The students

There were thirteen full time Masters students, three men and ten women from a group of fourteen. One was a part time student and was unable to attend to interview. They were aged from early twenties to late forties and the majority were from England with two international and one each from Wales and Ireland.
The majority had been state school educated and most also described their family circumstances as supportive. Eight had some education background in teaching: five others were NHS, business and sales.

Four stated that they still felt lacking in confidence on their Masters course, although most though felt that they had grown in confidence significantly whilst at sixth form college or university or college doing their first degrees.

Asked about how they felt about having the lecturer in the room when doing presentations, eleven said it was fine though two of the men said they had concerns about the lecturer knowing more and being the expert present and possibly therefore being shown up. Another international woman said it depended on how supportive the lecturer seemed and the other international student said that working in her second language made a difference too as she thought she would have felt more confident speaking in her first language.

All felt that presentations within the module were of value with some provisions such as it being important that they were not assessed. However, most nevertheless had found the experience difficult. They talked of feeling frightened, not liking it, fearing looking silly, fearing being shown up, worry about the content material being presented, and generally being nervous.

Coping strategies

Six said that using PowerPoint gave work structure and distracted the audience from selves but three also talked about having back up if the technology failed
For five practise was important and two talked about preparation time generally being vital. From this it was clear that they did not like being put on the spot and having to do a short presentation within a seminar session with no notice, something that many had experienced.

Four discussed not making eye contact as a means of helping them cope and three talked about appearing calm or discussed strategies to help them seem calm and help actually be calm.

Other points made individually included:

Have a plant in audience to encourage
Keep sense of perspective
Use humour to get audience onside
Rephrasing questions in a way that you can answer it
In Q&A if don't know the answers doesn't try to gloss over it

Water on stand by
Get it over with (try to go first)
Provide notes – people more attentive
Be interactive

However it should be noted that within the group, despite best efforts to be supportive, one student felt overwhelmed. She said that:

- Can't stand being centre of attention – would have preferred to present from back of the class or sat down
- Feels naked on stage – very vulnerable
- Wants to present, just can't deal with everything all at once

This student was Erin and because she found the experience especially problematic, I look at her interview data in more detail to see if we can draw out reasons for why this was so.

Case study: Erin

Support:
Family quite close knit but unlike what most other students' experience, Erin's parents are not very supportive; they have "terrible communication skills" she told me and are shy. She also said that her parents are apathetic to what she does – they worry about what others think she thinks so she paid her own way through education with no financial support They thought she was crazy doing a Masters degree and told her she shouldn't do it. She mentioned that her friends are quite shy as well. She feels best on a one to one basis with people overall.

Schooling:
Primary school teaching was in her home language with only 2 lessons a week in English and as a result feels her vocabulary is atrocious
Feels her lack of English skills let her down
Never wrote many essays in English at Secondary school; somehow managed to get out of it (never did homework)
Her degree was in science where they were not interested in the style of writing
Thus her Masters assignments overwhelmed her. In addition, she did no presentations at school except for one presentation in final year of first degree with just seven people.

Regarding a presentation for which she had two 2 weeks notice and talked about at some length with me, she said she couldn't concentrate on anything leading up to it. She felt terrified and nervous that she would forget everything or research the wrong thing, that it would be scrutinised and corrected in front of the class. She was also terrified of boring people. When the time came she read from PowerPoint. She couldn't explain or think about what she was saying and then 'Halfway through I stop and I froze'; her worst fears came true.
She felt angry with herself. It went so wrong she didn't want to do any more presentations.

Feelings:
She said that she typically:
Felt guilty, and felt inadequate too.
Too busy focusing on whether people like the presentation to relax
Really cares that other people think
If she suspects she is saying the wrong thing she starts stuttering
No confidence in her ability – not much experience talking in groups

Scared her presentation might appear childish in terms of phasing used
Never feel better afterwards as might be expected.

Peers/ lecturers:
She found she:
Watching the lecturer closely for reactions
Doing a non-assessed presentation she found it was 'worse actually for me'
Worry more about the lecturer than peers
Comparison issue with peers (who coped and who didn't)
Feel better when people present badly (not the only one!)

Subject matter:
Can make a difference – on this occasion it was new and abstract. Found it hard to knit together the theories
Left something out as she thought she was wrong – it was a vital part and she felt badly afterwards.

Coping strategies:
Makes her slides as flashy as possible to deflect attention from herself and keeps people's attention. Can't stand being the centre of attention. Would prefer to present from back of the class or sat down. She feels naked on stage – very vulnerable. She gets peers to smile and look interested at her to reassure her. She wants to present; she feels it is important to be able to do them just can't deal with everything all at once.

T&L:
Didn't feel like there was a get out clause (hated doing them and hated trying to get out of them)
Did a lot of work for the presentation before hand so no one thought she was lazy for not presenting
Would have preferred it was marked as it would have made it all worthwhile
Not effective for people that find it challenging – she didn't learn anything from it
Annoyed/ angered by doing it badly and getting no reward or learning anything
She suggests that we could have a group where half present and the other half prepare the presentation as a means of helping people like herself.

Graham Russell and Steve Shaw both at the University of Plymouth have also been looking at the impact of social anxiety on student learning. This has been partly funded by ESCalate and a report may be found on the ESCalate website.

Russell's work was with students across disciplines with 80% aged up to thirty. Earlier this year he used a social anxiety-screening tool to identify students with social anxiety and then invited them to take part in larger quantitative survey. The survey asked students about whether they felt anxious or embarrassed in typical learning situations. Presentations were the situations that caused the most anxiety scoring 83% as frequently causing anxiety.

When asked how such occasions caused them to feel, the data echoed included feeling shy, nervous, embarrassed, stuttering, speaking quickly, worry over response from tutor, feeling physically sick, problems remembering materials and self consciousness (Russell and Shaw, 2006).

Coping strategies for presentations included avoidance (pretending to be sick, missing class swapping modules to avoid presentation work) and preparation.

What also helped was friends and family support with 70% of the students stating these were a key source of support to help them cope with social anxiety. Personal tutors were the next most important source of help with 18%.

Russell then, like my own findings, suggests that social anxiety may be under recognised in university and college students, even in mature students such as those in the seminar group on the master's programme. Russell asked what the institutions could do to help support students and comments received included:

Practise presentations, offer a choice whether to participate or not, offer more training and development programmes to increase confidence in public speaking; have greater recognition of the condition and offer presentation skills workshops.

Woolf and Kavanagh have also been examining the issue, looking to help facilitate learning for students who are scared to speak out (Woolf and Kavanagh, 2006) and have been working with medical students on ice breaking activities and encouragement for students in all public speaking type interactions. Their findings are often very straightforward and similar to the above, underlining again the importance of being careful in the use of presentations as a learning tool.

Initial conclusions

It seems obvious from even an initial examination of the data and literature that we should use presentations with some caution and be aware that even as experienced teachers, lecturers and tutors pupils and students can hide their discomfort very effectively from us, lulling us into perhaps underestimating some of the drawbacks of this teaching tool. For example, returning to the school based study, I found that pupils typically used quite sophisticated avoidance strategies to minimise any perceived danger attending questioning in front of their peers - and with the Masters students where I was dealing with people of various ages, experience and background, even there they could hide many of their feelings about presentations until directly asked about it. Erin came across as a vivacious, lively confident person that was completely at odds with how she actually felt about presentations.

Pupils and students can learn without presenting – but of course not if the course requires presentations. If it does then this project data suggests that there must be support offered in the form of workshops and opportunities to practise and prepare fully. It should not be expected that students will just draw on their past experience or just "muddle through". To expect them to do so risks creating stress and anxiety that may in the end actually hinder their learning – or worse as in the case of Erin, contribute to a lack of student retention.

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Appendix 1
Research into student questioning and presenting
in whole group/ class scenarios.

Ethics: *All data (written and tapes) will be held securely and only used in an anonymised format for articles, papers, web based work and conference presentations. Interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed by a reputable researcher/ transcriber. If you would like to see a copy of the transcript and articles/ papers etc based on the data gathered for this research project, this will be arranged. You would be free to comment and these comments would be recorded if you wish - with the proviso that the researcher also reserves the right to their own interpretations of the data.* **If you agree to the above, please sign and give an email contact if you think you may like to be kept informed of work relating to the data:**

Name……………………………………Email…………………………………………….

Question

Can you relate a story / case study as an example of when you have been in a situation of presenting or answering a question and describe the event?

Please include: How did it feel when the teacher / lecturer/ tutor asked you a question or asked you to present some work in front of the other students?

What do you think was the other students / peer reaction to your answering questions or presenting work?

Did who was teaching matter to you?

Did the subject itself affect your feelings of being questioned or presenting?

Did you or would you/ have you used coping strategies or avoidance strategies in answering questions or presenting?

Additional questions to potentially offer background and additional insights

1. How would you describe yourself in terms of willingness to answer/ speak/ present in a seminar/ lecture session?
2. Has this changed over the course of your experience of education - from early childhood to the present? How?
3. Is the style of teaching (i.e. *using students feedback and contribution to seminars etc*) a successful learning strategy for you? What else may be useful or preferable?

Additional information to be used in possible generalising about themes etc.
Gender (F/M) ………………………Age (approx). …………...……years.
Nationality…………………………………………………………………..
Degree programme………………………………………………………….

Thank you! Dr Julie Anderson