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Digital literacy: digital maturity or digital bravery?

Bravery, technological literacy and political philosophy: replacing oral presentations with student-created video presentations

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Biography

Pete Woodcock is Head of the Division of Criminology, Politics and Sociology at the University of Huddersfield, and specialises in teaching the history of social and political theory. He has published widely on teaching and learning issues in politics and has recently completed an MBA in Higher Education Management.

Abstract

This paper overviews and analyses a project to replace the oral presentation element of a political theory module with a video presentation created by students. Its aim is not to provide a practical guide for the educator but to discuss how video presentations address a number of concerns that students raise about oral presentations. In particular, this paper will focus on the role that bravery has on a student's journey in education and how video presentations can help by moving the assessment of oral communication from a public to a private act. It will also look at how creating video presentations might stimulate digital literacy and suggest that it is the educator's rather than the student's literacy that is challenged by this process.

Key words: digital literacy, student experience, oral presentations

Introduction

This paper discusses the role that the digital literacy of students can play in creating video presentations to replace oral presentations as a form of assessment and in so doing help to remove some of the anxiety students feel about this type of assessment. It will suggest that video presentations can reduce stress on students (which is a good thing), while still assessing some of the same core skills that make oral presentations such a popular form of assessment.

The paper begins by providing a brief overview of a project led by me to replace oral presentations with video presentations in a first-year political theory module. It then examines the notion of bravery in education, suggesting that being a student implies bravery and that we should look at ways that reduce stress for particular assignments (e.g. oral presentations), as this will not detract from the character-building nature of HE. I suggest that the students we are teaching in the 21st century tend to be digital natives and are therefore comfortable with bringing technology into assessment; thankfully, doing so does not simply remove one level of anxiety and replace it with another.

The paper concludes by examining student feedback from the project, which suggests that, while many students do not wish to see oral presentations completely replaced by video presentations, they do not have a problem with the technology involved in creating video presentations and prefer creating them to delivering an oral presentation. It will be seen that the only technological failings in this project were mine (a digital immigrant). These failings were dealt with comfortably by the students and me alike, showing that bravery is needed from staff and universities when introducing technology to assessment measures.

Overview of project

For the past seven years I have led a year one (foundation level) introductory module in the history of political thought at the University of Huddersfield, which has included an individual student oral presentation as part of the module's diet of summative assessment. Students are asked prepare a short presentation to be delivered in a seminar group to a small number of their peers on a thinker of their choice. While students always did well in these presentations, in the academic year 2011/12, I decided to change the format owing to practical problems. The amount of seminar time it took for students to deliver oral presentations and, I felt, the anxiety it created for foundation-level students getting to grips with what was for some a tricky new topic meant that change was needed. At the same time, I felt that oral presentations in principle were worth keeping as they tested a number of skills (such as presentation skills) that could not be tested by an essay or exam. In addition, I suspected that the process students went through to create their oral presentations enhanced deep learning, as the nervousness that accompanied speaking in public led students to work hard on a presentation and develop a more critical stance to their learning. Joughin (2007), for example, notes that, aside from assessment of presentational skills, presentations are "a particularly powerful form of learning and assessment". When students are faced with the nervous prospect of facing their peers:

[They] see the presentation in terms of developing a position to be argued, they are likely to work hard, experience material as having a high degree of personal relevance, accept a high level of ownership of their work, and, perhaps most importantly, develop a deeper understanding of what they are studying.

(Joughin 2007: 333)

Oral presentations therefore provide a nerve-wracking and unpleasant experience for some students, but a nerve-wracking experience that leads to deeper understanding and knowledge. I was therefore looking for a way to keep what was good about oral presentations while at the same time avoiding the practical problems and perhaps some of the discomfort for students. When considering this, I was influenced by the web 2.0 technologies that allow the uploading of videos to the web for others to see and comment on.

As part of a previous project (see Woodcock 2009), I had created a number of mini-lectures on political theory (available on my [YouTube](#) channel), and I wondered whether students could produce similar videos to replace an oral presentation. This format would mean that presentation and oral communication skills could still be assessed but in a more private manner. However, this placed demands on the digital literacy of students, which concerned me: perhaps students would be unable to create the videos? These concerns, I would happily later find out, were groundless.

Bravery and technology

Oral presentations are by their nature very public pieces of work. Students must present new material to a group of fellow students (who are not always friends) while being graded by a tutor. Indeed, for internal moderation to take place, I have always recorded presentations, as I consider a small video camera to be less of a threat to students than the presence of another member of staff. However, the camera was another thing for the students to worry about. What bravery students require in undertaking this assessment. How uncomfortable it must make them feel. Indeed, so uncomfortable that, in the past, some students decided to forego marks rather than go through with their oral presentations.

Of course, just because a form of assessment makes a student feel uncomfortable is not a reason not to do it. All higher education, we hope, involves challenging students' most cherished beliefs, opening their minds to new ideas and sometimes, perhaps, quite deliberately making them feel uncomfortable in the learning process. If we accept this as true then all learning and all assessment require bravery, not just oral presentations. Barnett (2007: 68), for example, invites us to reflect on the fact that students are "asked to submit to the strangeness of new worlds opening before" them, and that if this strangeness did not exist "there would be question marks over whether we were in the presence of higher education" at all. It is this challenging nature of higher education that is unsettling, leads students into uncertainty and requires much courage: courage to move towards learning outcomes for which they, and perhaps even their tutors, do not know and cannot specify. As Barnett states:

What courage, what daring, we require of our students in higher education. A willingness to venture forth into they know not what.

(Barnett 2007: 70)

Handing in an essay is an act of bravery, even when the student knows that it will be seen by a very few academics who will not publicly release their thoughts on it. Bravery is what being a student is; not something linked to an oral presentation. By taking new ideas and concepts and writing about them in order to be assessed is a great act of bravery. If courage is necessary to traverse the uncertain path that is the student's lot, their journey in education, then we should, as educators, aim to increase student's self-esteem because a student with high self-esteem is more likely to tackle head on the situations in learning that require bravery. Abouserie (1995: 24), for example, suggests that "students' self-esteem has a significant effect on the way they deal with information and with learning situations", that programmes for the enhancement of self-esteem to "help them control their resources and monitor their level of performance" would "help change students'

perceptions of themselves and of their learning environment”. A crucial element of the student experience in general – and I suggest our approach to teaching, learning and assessment – should be about helping students develop high self-esteem in their studies. This might involve removing, at the foundation level at least, opportunities for public embarrassment, such as those provided by oral presentations when one has alternatives that assess similar skills, in an attempt to help foster this self-esteem or, rather, as an act to remove a major opportunity to lose self-esteem.¹

The ideal replacement for an oral presentation would be one that is challenging for students and rewards certain presentational skills that students may not see rewarded elsewhere. At the same time, it should reduce the evident stress that oral presentations have, while acknowledging that that stress is not necessarily a bad thing. My thoughts are that, while assessing oral presentational skills in a very public manner might help foster deep learning, it might also be too stressful for some students who will lose out as a result. If we accept that all learning, public or private, requires bravery, then why risk the knock to self-esteem that may come for a student either underperforming or failing to perform in public.

Of course, what students generally expect in terms of communication and technology from university has dramatically changed in the past decade. There is no reason why assessment is any different. Many academics receive papers online via Turnitin, and perhaps mark on GradeMark, so the notion of students submitting work electronically is nothing new. Indeed, most students (although not all) are, in Prensky’s (2001) term, ‘digital natives’ due to the “rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the twentieth century”. Today’s students represent:

... the first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and other toys and tools of the digital age ... Computer games, e-mail, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives.

(Prensky 2001: 3)

Academics, on the other hand, of whom 75% are over 35 (UUK 2009), are generally digital immigrants, people who have not grown up taking certain forms of technology for granted, although may still use them. It is one of the common moans of academics that students text during lectures, have Facebook on their laptops in seminars and send emails to them at 10pm. But students are used to multi-tasking electronically and communicating in this manner. This may lead to problems where students’ expectations of the learning process, imbued with their understanding of the place of technology in society, may clash with those of the educator who might (consciously or unconsciously) expect students to learn in a manner similar to how they learned ten or 20 years before. It might lead to situations where the digital literacy of academics lags behind that of students. This may in turn prevent technological solutions from being adopted by universities owing to the educators’ technological nervousness.

Challenges

To ensure that students did not get nervous about the creation of their video presentations, I spent some time informing them that I did not expect broadcast-quality material or any complicated use of editing; a simple head and shoulders shot would be sufficient. I stressed that the purpose was not to test their video-

¹ I am not suggesting that oral presentations should be removed from all HE programmes, but rather that better places might be found for them than at foundation level when tricky theoretical material has been introduced.

editing skills but to replace an oral presentation. The ability of students to create these videos was aided by the fact that almost all taking the module received an iPad 2 free of charge from the university as part of a teaching and learning initiative. This had an inbuilt video camera, and editing apps such as iMovie could be purchased relatively inexpensively. I also held a workshop to show students how to create simple videos on the iPad. A few students on the module either did not qualify for an iPad or chose to use the webcam on their computers or other devices to make the video. All were successful; students managed to create videos very nicely with no significant technological hitches.

Where I was dreadfully blasé was in providing space for students to submit their projects. This proved the biggest technological challenge. I initially asked students to upload their finished videos to a shared Dropbox folder and assumed that this would be uncomplicated. However, this was beset with technical problems. First, I did not set the students hard and fast rules about the size of their presentations or advise them how, after recording, to minimise the size of the files. Consequently, the Dropbox folder soon filled up and students were unable to upload their videos. Second, some students deleted files from the shared folder in order to put their files in, not realising that this deleted them from everyone's folder. Many students were resourceful in finding ways of getting their files to me when they realised they could not put them in Dropbox and the files were too large for their email accounts. A number put them on YouTube and sent me the link; others used file-sharing devices such as SkyDrive.² In the end, I received most when I held office hours and students gave me the files on a memory stick.

The chief conclusion from this process was that the technical difficulties came when I (a digital immigrant) became involved. Students managed the process well. The digital literacy of the students was not in doubt; it was the digital literacy of the module leader and the university that was questionable. That said, although the process of collecting the videos was tricky, it was manageable, and the students approached my dubious competence with cheerful tolerance. Digital literacy thus requires bravery from lecturers and universities as well as from students because coping with different forms of assessment might take a few attempts and trial and error to perfect. While the process highlighted errors on my part, it also showed me that it was possible to recover from those errors and move on.

Student feedback

Student feedback on doing a video presentation rather than an oral presentation in class overwhelming indicated that a) it was easy to do (i.e. created no great technological problems for students), and b) whereas video presentations did create their own stresses, students on the whole preferred these to the prospect of an oral presentation. Crucially, however, while most students reported that they preferred doing video presentations, a few deliberately pointed out that they should not replace oral presentations but rather be an additional form of assessment alongside oral presentations.

No students reported any significant difficulties in creating their videos. One student suggested that their technical skills were “pretty limited” and they were “surprised how simple the process of recording the presentation” was. Another spoke of a “few stressful and failed” attempts at recording the video but concluded that once these had been overcome it was “relatively easy from a technical perspective”. The concerns I had that not all students would have the technical skills to create a video have proved unfounded

² Putting videos on YouTube would, of course, have been the simplest way to share these files. I decided against this as I thought it might create anxiety (the very anxiety the video presentations were supposed to remove), even if they were uploaded with strong privacy settings.

as learners in this group, mostly digital natives, were able to get to grips with making these videos comfortably. The only technical difficulties that emerged related to students getting the videos to me, which was a problem of my own creation.

The general opinion among students was that a making a video presentation was a less stressful exercise than doing an oral presentation. One student said that doing a presentation in front of the class “would be a more daunting prospect”. Another said that making a video was “less pressure than if you were in front of an audience”. Another remarked: “For people who lack self-assurance or get nervous when having to speak in public, I’m sure that this is a much more reassuring way to do a presentation.” Another said that doing a presentation in front of an audience “would make me more nervous”; they were concerned that “my mind would go blank and I’d make a mess of it”. This is resonant of the attitude that students took towards oral presentations: it wasn’t the pressure and/or nerves as an experience in and of themselves that they were concerned about but the effect this might have on their performance. The video presentation format insulated against this concern because “it’s easy to correct errors through rerecording” or “if you make a total mess of it you can simply delete it and start again”. So students generally suggested that video presentations were a good thing because they allowed students to put in their best effort unhindered by the potential failures that nerves and pressure could bring.

A couple of students took the opportunity in their feedback to support the notion that video presentations should not completely replace oral presentations (although no one suggested that video presentations should not be used). One student suggested that a slightly different skill set is used in an oral presentation: they provide the opportunity “to practise my public speaking skills and I could see first-hand how engaged my audience is”. This is, of course, entirely accurate. The skills needed to make a successful video presentation and the skills needed to deliver an oral presentation certainly overlap, but they are not identical. Another student said they had been “utterly awful at oral presentations” but that “it is always an adventure when I have to do one” and enjoyed seeing “tangible progress in my skills”. Students do not, therefore, run and hide from things they are bad at; they want to do them to improve themselves. The same student concluded their feedback by saying that they thought there was a future for video presentations, but “I wouldn’t say that this will be the death of the oral presentation [as] it is nice to mix things up, right?” Another student forcefully backed up this opinion, pointing out that oral presentations should be seen as central to politics students:

Overall, I did find it very useful and think that video presentations should complement oral presentations; however, I am not convinced that they should be substitutes. I simply think that oral presentations are too important, especially for politics students, and should be a part of the learning experience. To put it simply, in a perfect world, I would love to do both.

One student did, however, raise a concern peculiarly related to the postmodern web 2.0-enabled world and specific only to the video presentation. While stating that they preferred the video presentation to an oral presentation, they also said: “I don’t like the idea that a video recording of me is out there somewhere.” Privacy, therefore, is an issue and we should not believe that students are so comfortable with the digital world that they are prepared to have their work publicly available on the internet. Public-ness is an issue here then. Just as students are concerned about oral presentations because completing work publicly is stressful, neither might they be happy for their work to be public, especially where you cannot hide from being identified on it. Some students voluntarily uploaded their videos to YouTube and sent me the link when the technological issues regarding hand-in surfaced but many students would not be happy with this approach.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to show that video presentations can help reduce the anxieties students feel about oral presentations and that most students have sufficient digital literacy to be comfortable in creating them. It has also suggested that any teething difficulties that come along in the process can easily be overcome and, therefore, that bravery is needed by university staff to accommodate students' digital literacy in their assessment methods. This is not a call to completely replace public oral presentations because of the anxiety that they cause (even students think there is a place for them), nor is it suggesting that anxiety is in and of itself a bad thing, as bravery is very much part of the student experience. It simply suggests that we can remove some of the anxiety and stress while still assessing similar presentational skills. Also, as one of my students suggests, "It's nice to mix things up, right?"

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