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Employability and oral assessment

Nick Redfern

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Introduction

Research has shown that students' experience of higher education is to a significant extent determined by their perception of assessment (Biggs 1999, Boud 1995, Ramsden 1992). One way in which perceptions of assessment may be enhanced through stressing the employability value of assessed exercises, and this case study looks at how employability can be incorporated in an academic subject and how students' perceptions of oral presentations can be enhanced by stressing the employability value of this type of assessment.

The employability profile

The role of employability in higher education may be defined as 'equipping individuals to secure their own economic success' (Denholm *et al.* 2003: 12) and covers traditional academic skills, personal development skills, and enterprise or business skills (Purcell and Pitcher 1996). However, to the student in the classroom concepts such as 'own economic success' or 'enterprise or business skills' are somewhat abstract entities that relate to a future beyond higher education, and Leggott and Stapleford (2004) and Ribchester and Mitchell (2004) have both found that students have a low level of awareness of the skills they are developing at university. For employability to have a positive impact on learning it must be brought directly to the attention of students in order that they be made aware of how it contributes to their academic and personal development in a meaningful way. This is best achieved not at the macro-level across whole degree courses, but at the micro-level where employability is linked to a specific teaching and learning activity. One means by which this can be achieved is by providing them with an outline of the skills that a learning activity involves – a profile of the activity's relationship to employment. In order to be effective this information should:

- be linked to a specific teaching and learning activity (e.g., giving a presentation);
- clearly establish the type and range of skills to be developed;
- be made available to students at an early stage in the activity;
- be related directly to assessment.

Such a profile can be easily integrated into the curriculum with a minimum of disruption, and in the example below, the employability profile of oral assessment matches closely with what is

generally agreed is assessed in oral presentations, including knowledge and understanding, applied problem-solving ability, interpersonal competence, and personal qualities (Joughin 1999).

Using an employability profile for oral assessment

As part of Films and British National Identity, a level two module aimed at history undergraduates at the University of Central Lancashire, students are required to deliver a ten minute presentation on the representation of Britishness in the cinema, taking into account the historical cultural context of a film, and commenting on the film's relationship to concepts of a British national cinema and/or the ways in which the film constructs a British national identity. As part of the presentation students were required to include a clip from their chosen that lasted no more than five minutes. In addition, students were also required to submit a 1000 word reflection on their presentation indicating how the presentation was received the group, the main issues arising in discussion.

In preparation for the presentations students were presented with detailed instructions on how to structure and present their ideas, both verbally and using visual aids. A key part of these instructions was the emphasis paid to the opportunity for students to develop skills that could be transferred to an employment context. The employability profile was comprised of categories drawn from the Humanities Employability Framework developed by Centre for Employability through the Humanities (CETH 2007), and emphasised research skills, personal development, presentation skills, and reflection. The employability profile was mapped onto twelve assessment criteria for the presentations under the following four headings:

- Academic content: understanding of core knowledge, quality of research, and use of appropriate critical and/or theoretical concepts.
- Planning and organisation: structure of the presentation, effective use of presentation materials (e.g., IT, handouts, film clips) as appropriate, pacing of presentation.
- Communication skills: clarity of presentation, appropriate use of body language, responsiveness to audience.
- Reflection: ability to identify strengths and areas for improvement, understand own learning, understand own decision making.

Students were marked out of ten for each of the criteria under academic content, planning and organisation, and communication skills, and were awarded further marks for the quality of their reflection. The awarded grade was based on a composite of these marks.

Students were thus made explicitly aware of the concept of employability, and were also made aware of the relationship of these categories to how they would be assessed. This was done by providing students with a copy of the assessment and self-assessment forms at the briefing, which set out both the employability profile and the assessment criteria, as well as providing an

opportunity for students to identify what they thought they had done well and where they felt they could improve. These were the same forms through which students received feedback.

On this module the employability profile for oral assessment had two major benefits. First, students were made aware of employability in a way that was meaningful to them – specifically by virtue of the fact that employability was linked directly to assessment. As a result they set out preparing their presentations with the need to develop transferable skills in mind. In their reflections, several students noted that they were more willing to try new things in terms of using visual materials (e.g., PowerPoint, editing clips), and were able to see the benefit of developing new skills through presentations because they saw there was some employability payoff. Students also saw the exercise as a way of building up confidence, and of taking control of their own personal development through reflection in a way that was relevant to their learning rather than being separated from it under the term ‘personal development planning.’ As a consequence, the second major benefit derived from the using the profile was that students perceived the assessment process in a positive way. The students’ evaluation of the assessment component of the module was overwhelmingly positive, with one-third of students stating that they were very satisfied with both the form of assessment and the feedback received, while several students identified the presentations as one of the most enjoyable aspects of the module.

Conclusion

The first stage in improving students’ employability is in making them aware of the issue, and identifying the employability profile of oral assessment and discussing it with students adds value to oral assessment in a number of ways:

- The profile makes employability explicit and relevant to students and they become aware of the opportunity to develop skills that are transferable to employment.
- While feedback on the academic content of presentations tends to be summative, the employability profile encourages formative assessment.
- Academic achievement is linked to the development of transferable skills.
- By reading the students’ reflections it is possible to get a clear idea of the appropriateness of using oral assessment and whether or not it is having the desired impact on learning.

Gibbs writes that assessment ‘frames learning, creates learning activity, and orients all aspects of learning behaviour’ (2006: 23), and if the emphasis placed on employability in higher education can have a positive impact on how students perceive the value and opportunity of assessment then making this connection clear prove to be significant to both tutors and students.

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