

ORALITY AND LEARNING IN ORAL PRESENTATIONS

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Oral assessment can exert a powerful influence on students' experience of learning. This paper reports a phenomenographic study which highlights contrasting ways in which students can experience one form of oral assessment, the oral presentation to peers, and discusses the findings of this study in the context of Walter Ong's 'psychodynamics of orality'.

Introduction

It has long been claimed that assessment plays a decisive role in student learning by motivating study, giving direction to that study, and influencing students' approaches to learning. The assiduous researcher could no doubt find many claims similar to Melancthon's that

“(n)o academical exercise can be more useful than that of examination. It whets the desire for learning; it enhances the solicitude of study while it animates the attention of whatever is taught” (Philip Melancthon, *De Studs Adolescentum*, 15th C, cited by Madaus, Russell and Higgins 2009, 140)

Research within the 'student approaches to learning' tradition pioneered by Marton and Säljö (1976; 1997) has addressed the influence of assessment on learning in two ways. Firstly, a number of comparative studies have identified the tendency of different forms of assessment to be associated with different approaches to learning (for example, Tang, 1994; Thomas and Bain, 1984; Scouller, 1998; and early studies by Meyer, 1935 and Terry, 1933). Secondly, work by Biggs (1988), Hounsell (1987) and others has focused on variation in students' perceptions of a single assessment context, noting that different students can perceive the requirements of an assessment task quite differently and consequently adopt different approaches to learning in light of these perceptions.

The empirical study reported here continues and extends this work by considering how the nature and meaning of orality in students' contrasting experience of oral presentations. The paper begins by noting a preliminary study of students' responses to oral assessment, outlines the nature of 'primary orality' described by Ong (1982/2002), summarises the findings of a more extended empirical study, and concludes by relating these findings to Ong's 'psychodynamics of orality'.

The preliminary study

A small scale study of eight students in law and theology indicated that oral assessment had the potential to strongly influence student learning. The first year law students had taken part in a viva where two lecturers examined them on a prepared topic, while the theology students had conducted a short presentation and discussion with a small group of fellow students.

All of these students saw a greater need to understand in the context of oral assessment, as the following two quotations illustrate:

- “In the written work I would just put it down and think ‘I really don’t understand this anyway but I’ll just quote from the book and put it in’. I wouldn’t do that (in the oral presentation) because I’d be worried someone would ask me, ‘Well, what do you mean by that?’ and ‘What do you think about it? Do you really agree with that?’ (Theology student)
- “You think, ‘I’ll just read the book and I’ll go there and do it like I do an assignment and just write some kind of bull, whether it relates to the topic or not.’ But (in the viva) you know ... you’re going to look a fool ... so you make sure you know what you are saying. (Law student).

These students also described a strong sense of personal involvement in their oral assessment:

- “In an exam you’re just a number, but the (viva’s) personalized and you’re in direct contact with the people who assess you.” (Law student)
- “It’s directly associated with you.” (Theology student)

Given the strength of these students’ views and the fact that they were expressed by each student in the pilot study, the possibility that this had been stimulated by the oral nature of the assessment warranted exploration.

The nature of orality

If the defining characteristic of oral assessment is the fact that it is conducted orally or by word of mouth rather than through writing or any other process, it would seem important to consider literature that might illuminate our understanding of oral modes of communicating. A comprehensive analysis of the literature on oral communication is beyond the scope of this short paper. Here two prominent perspectives on orality and literacy are noted in the hope that they may provoke further thought on the nature and value of oral assessment. Plato in the *Phaedrus* commenced a discussion of orality and literacy that continues to the present day, while Walter Ong has drawn attention to important distinctions between orality and literacy. (It should be noted that both address the transition from purely oral cultures to literate cultures, whereas our concern is with the use of the oral medium in contemporary literate cultures. Nevertheless, as we shall see, their writing is highly suggestive.)

Plato

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato addresses “the propriety and impropriety of writing, and the conditions which determine them” (Plato, 1973, p. 274). In asserting “the inferiority of the written to the spoken word” (p. 274), he argues that writing destroys memory and the need to use one’s internal resources, that the written word cannot respond to questions,

and ultimately, that truth is found in the direct action of one mind on another which can occur only through spoken words. The following exchange expresses this forcefully:

Socrates: Now can we distinguish another kind of communication which is the legitimate brother of written speech, and see how it comes into being and how much better and more effective it is?

Phaedrus: What kind do you mean and how does it come about?

Socrates: I mean the kind that is written on the soul of the hearer together with understanding; that knows how to defend itself, and can distinguish between those it should address and those in whose presence it should be silent.

Phaedrus: You mean the living and animate speech of a man with knowledge, of which written speech might fairly be called a kind of shadow?

Socrates: Exactly.

(Plato, 1973, p. 276)

While Plato's claim for the superiority of oral communication has not been the subject of educational or psychological study, it does raise issues concerning the power of speech and the relationship of a speaker to his or her audience that may be of relevance to oral assessment.

Ong

Much, but not all, of Ong's study of orality has been based on pre-literate societies or societies that have experienced minimal impact from writing. He distinguishes the 'primary orality' of such societies with a 'secondary orality' in literate societies where orality exists in the context of writing, print, and now electronic forms of communication. Of particular relevance to this paper are what Ong (1982/2002) terms 'the psychodynamics of orality'. Six points in particular are noted here:

- The spoken word is associated with power and action. Ong notes that the Hebrew word *dabar* means both 'word' and 'event', and that oral language is 'close to the human lifeworld' and concerned with action rather than abstraction.
- An interesting notion is that orality is 'agonistically toned'. 'Agonistic' is derived from a word used to describe Greek athletic contests, and is used by Ong in the sense of polemics or combativeness, conveying notions of controversy and aggression.
- Ong claims that "writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle" (Ong, 2002, pp. 43-44).
- Orality is described as "empathic and participatory rather than objectively distanced" (Ong, 2002, p. 45). "For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known, 'getting with it'. Writing

separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for ‘objectivity’ in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing” (Ong, 2002, pp. 45).

- Ong emphasises the personal nature of orality and relates this to the physical production of sound. “Because in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups. ... There is no collective noun or concept for readers corresponding to ‘audience’” (Ong, 2002, p. 73).
- Finally, Ong notes the presence of an audience in relation to the spoken word, while pointing out that the “writer’s audience is always a fiction” (Ong, 1977, p. 55). The reader is absent from the writing of a text, and may be anyone from anywhere, [and] the writer [is] absent from the reading of a text, whereas speaker and hearer are fully determined persons normally present to one another quite consciously in vocal exchange” (Ong, 1982, p. 269).

If contemporary students were experiencing oral assessment processes as significantly different to written work and if these differences were leading to more desirable learning processes and greater understanding, further research seemed warranted.

The extended empirical study

An in-depth study was conducted using theology students whose assessment alternated between written papers and oral presentations to a small group of peers. The nature of the assessment tasks was similar: students selected a topic, researched it, and presented their findings through, on the one hand, a short written paper, or on the other hand, a ten-minute presentation followed by discussion. The oral format was included because the course coordinators believed that articulating one’s ideas and having these challenged by peers was a vital part of the learning process. The phenomenographic study involved interviews with 15 students, analysis of the resulting transcripts to identify ‘categories of description’ for the variation in how students experienced this form of assessment, and the elucidation of the aspects of oral presentations associated with the different ways of experiencing the presentations.

While the coordinators had one view of the oral presentations, the study identified three quite distinctive ways in which students saw the assessment task. Thus students variously described the task as:

- (a) a *presentation per se* – an explanation, a series of points, or a summary of others’ ideas, designed to fill the time available. Here the focus was on the efficient transmission of ideas.
- (b) a process that demanded *understanding*, usually because the student anticipated being questioned by his or her audience and did not want to be found wanting. Here the focus was on mastering ideas.
- (c) an *argument*, where the student developed his or her own position on a topic and sought to persuade his or her peers.

These contrasting conceptions of the oral presentation can be understood in terms of five aspects of presentations that were identified in the analysis of transcripts:

- *The nature and locus of theological knowledge.* For some students, theology resided in books and was essentially the ideas of others. Some saw the need to make this knowledge their own. Others saw theology as the development of their own, informed, point of view.
- *The interactive nature of the context.* Some saw the presentation as essentially one-way transmission, while others experienced a high level of interaction with their audience.
- *Feelings.* Feelings ranged from a neutral lack of anxiety to a heightened sense of self-awareness.
- *Sense of audience.* Some students seemed quite unaware of their audience while for others the audience was central to their experience.
- *Comparisons with the written assignments.* Some found the oral presentations to be significantly more challenging than the written assignments, while others experienced the opposite.

These conceptions of the oral presentation and their associated structural aspects have been described in detail elsewhere (Joughin, 2007). In this paper, our concern is with ‘orality’; these aspects, and the variation in how they were experienced, can be considered in relation to how ‘oral’ the assessment was perceived to be. They can also be seen in light of Ong’s psychodynamics of orality. These two themes are addressed in the following section.

‘Orality’ and oral assessment

The defining feature of oral assessment is that it is conducted by word of mouth. This feature alone is significant, but it also gives rise to a number of what might be termed ‘secondary characteristics of oral assessment’, including the presence of an audience, the physical presence of the student in front of this audience, an immediate relationship between the student and audience, and feelings associated with the oral mode of communication and interaction. These contribute to the oral nature of oral assessment, or what could be termed the ‘orality’ of oral assessment which distinguishes it from written forms of assessment from the student’s perspective. This section will explore the orality of oral assessment by considering (i) the role of orality in relation to the three conceptions of oral assessment identified in this study, including students’ awareness of orality as expressed through their awareness of particular aspects of oral assessment, with particular emphasis on comparisons with written assessment, and (ii) the ‘psychodynamics of orality’ as these are evidenced in this study.

Orality and conceptions of oral assessment

One way of viewing the three conceptions of oral assessment is in terms of increasing degrees of differentiation from written assessment or, to approach this from the opposite direction, the degree to which the conceptions are aligned with the characteristics of orality.

When oral assessment is seen as *presentation*, students do not describe any substantial differences between the oral and the written form of assessment, and in fact typically describe the two forms as similar. Ong uses the term ‘secondary orality’ to describe the nature of orality in literate cultures where orality has come to be dependent on literacy, so that its form is different from that of the orality of pre-literate cultures. A parallel process can be seen in the conception of presentation where students focus on the written form of the paper they are going to present, the written overhead transparencies they will use, or the summaries of written texts that they will present. One student’s comment that “I did a summary that I put on an overhead and photocopied the primary source things” epitomizes an essentially written approach to an apparently oral activity.

Where oral assessment is seen in terms of *understanding*, the oral nature of assessment is still not prominent. While there is an awareness of audience, that audience functions to promote a process that could equally well be conducted in writing. The form of expression remains tied to that of presentation, though understanding is required to allow that presentation to be adaptable to the probing questions of the audience.

Where oral assessment is seen as *argument*, the differentiation between the two forms of assessment is at its greatest. Here the ‘secondary characteristics of oral assessment’ feature prominently in students’ awareness, so that instead of writing-based restatements of others’ ideas, the exercise is seen as a personal and oral one:

The course is really spot on as far as tempting you to think and have your own opinions, so it wasn’t regurgitating the whole stuff. It was a reinterpretation of stuff, and *speaking opinions*. (Emphasis added)

Oral assessment and the psychodynamics of orality

While Ong’s work was based on the orality of pre-literate societies, the characteristics that Ong attributes to orality are surprisingly similar to the qualities associated with the conception of oral assessment as a position to be argued:

- Ong noted that the spoken word is associated with power and action. In this study, some students regarded oral presentation as having a real effect on their audience and saw the attempt to argue a position as an attempt to generate authentic change in others. Oral assessment was clearly seen as having an impact. As one student noted in comparison to written assignments:

When you’re giving a presentation as opposed to an assignment, often the words when spoken verbally have a lot more force than they do when written down in an assignment.

- Ong’s argument that orality is ‘agonistically toned’ is particularly pertinent to oral assessment as a position to be argued. ‘Agonistic’ refers to combativeness, polemics, controversy and aggression, factors that were all strongly expressed by one student’s statement that “it really does become a battle”.
- Ong’s description of the relationship between the knower and what is known was strongly reflected in this study:

For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known, ‘getting with it’. Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for ‘objectivity’ in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. (Ong, 1982, pp. 45-46)

Students who saw oral assessment as a position to be argued made strong distinctions between oral and written assessment. Oral assessment was seen as more associated with themselves, more authentic and more engaging. One student expressed a close relationship with the spoken word — “I own the words I speak more than I own the words that I write” — and a marked distancing from the words she would write — “I can put the words on paper that I write and hand it in and think ‘That was the biggest load of rubbish’ and make it sound good even though I don’t believe it ... ”

- Ong’s observations regarding the presence of an audience in orality, compared to the fictional nature of the writer’s audience, are reflected in the strong sense of audience associated with the conception of oral assessment as a position to be argued.
- The final psychodynamic factor noted earlier related the personal nature of orality to the physical production of sound as an expression of the speaker’s self. While this factor was not clearly expressed by students in this study, it may be reflected in the more personal nature of oral assessment associated with seeing oral assessment as a position to be argued. Certainly the comparative statements include numerous references to the more personal nature of oral assessment when compared to the written assignment:
 - “... it’s directly associated with you.”
 - “The only difference would be for the (presentation) I’m thinking again more personally.”
 - “I do feel the authenticity aspect of it was an important one ... There’s probably still an essence of that not so authentic part in the written papers.”

Conclusion

The study reported here strongly suggests that oral presentations as a form of oral assessment can have a powerful influence on learning. As with any form of assessment, students’ conceptions of oral presentations will vary, and it is only when students’ conceptions of oral presentations incorporate a strong awareness of its ‘orality’ that the

positive effects on learning of this form of assessment come to the fore. When students believe that the task requires them to develop and argue a position, present their case without reliance on written supports, and interact vigorously with their audience, the elements of orality are highlighted and the psychodynamics of orality interact with the process of learning in complex but supportive ways.

Very few studies of oral assessment from the students' perspective have been reported in the higher education literature. The present study suggests that further research in this area could be very fruitful. There is considerable scope for researching different forms of oral assessment and considering students' experience of this assessment in light of theories of orality in contemporary, literate society.

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