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Enhancing Assessment Practices

Encouraging students to listen and talk: Assessing oral skills in a level one history module

Cite as;

Davis, J. 2020. Encouraging students to listen and talk: Assessing oral skills in a level one history module (Study 14) IN: Queen's Learning and Teaching Hub.

Available from:

<https://go.qub.ac.uk/learnteachhub>

Description

The pre-existing level-one modules for the history degree pathways pay due attention to many of the common concerns regarding student transition from secondary to tertiary education. There is thus a focus on essay writing, exams, group work, independent reading skills and referencing. However, it was observed that the level of critical engagement and debate in tutorials/seminars also needed to be considered more effectively, alongside oral and listening skills more broadly. In order to address this, James Davis and Andrew Holmes developed in 2014 a new level-one module called 'Revolutions' (HIS1004). This module examines a range of revolutionary events from c.1600 to the present day, encompassing the American and French Revolutions of the late eighteenth century, the communist revolutions of Russia, China and Cuba, and the more recent upheavals of the Velvet Revolutions and the Arab Spring. The content of the course focuses on important historiographical skills by encouraging a comparative approach across a long chronological period - an approach that level-one students may not have encountered before. The module underwent a three-year cycle of development. In the original plan, three revolutions were highlighted as case studies (French Revolution, Industrial Revolution, Russian Revolution) alongside two introductory weeks that looked more broadly at the historiography and main themes. 'Chinese Revolutions' was introduced as a replacement for the Industrial Revolution in the second iteration of the module. The assessment model in these iterations involved an individual student presentation on a specific historiographical debate and an individual written response (post-tutorial) by another student, alongside a more traditional summative essay. The written response was intended to be a new way of encouraging student engagement and discussion. A number of academic staff were involved in delivering the module over these two years (Dr James Davis, Dr Andrew Holmes, Dr Alex Titov, Dr Ian Campbell, Dr Aglaia de Angeli), as well as some teaching assistants. The content and delivery of the module was reviewed as a matter of course at each stage. As a result of the review, there was concern that students were finding it difficult to connect the broader themes and debates to the specific case studies, and that they were not engaged sufficiently with the response assessment. Two substantial changes were thus made to the module. In September 2016, James Davis solely delivered the lecture content of the module in order to provide some continuity and to cover a range of revolutions stretching from the English Civil War to the Arab Spring. The assessment schema was also substantially revised in order to place listening and discursive skills at its core and focus on these important learning tools

Motivation and Aims

Seminar-style teaching is a core component for many undergraduate history modules. Students taking history modules spend much of their time within this format, which is intended to encourage in-depth discussion and peer-to-peer debate in order to foster critical thinking (Anderson, 1997). However, tutors are well aware that there is tendency for seminars to become a series of dialogues between tutor and individual students. Level-one students, in particular, are not always confident about engaging critically with their peers in a seminar setting. This is not just about confidence; there are a number of oral and seminar skills that students develop during their time at university, but which are not always made explicit from the outside. For example, active, critical listening is a skill that can be nurtured and enables

students to form pertinent analysis and questions during seminars. It is beneficial for students for such skills to be highlighted at an early stage in their university career.

Methodology

The intended learning outcomes of the level-one module were:

- An understanding of the concept and the scholarly debates that surround the term revolution.
- An ability to engage with the most important historiographical debates relating to the subject-matter of the module.
- Effective oral communication skills.
- The ability to contribute effectively and courteously to class debates and discussions.
- An ability to write an informed analysis of historical problems discussed in tutorials.
- An ability to work independently.
- Enhanced ability to think critically, reason logically, and evaluate evidence.

After two years of development, three main assessments were finalised for the module in 2016: 1) an individual student presentation (30%); 2) an assessed response to the student presentation, both oral and written (30%); 3) an individual oral examination (30%). Level-one students are also assessed more generally on their tutorial participation (10%). The first two components were linked. The student presentation concerned a particular historiographical debate for that week and lasted 10 minutes maximum. Students had to submit their Powerpoint as part of the assignment. Respondents were assigned for each tutorial, who would act as chairs of small group discussions on the subject of the student presentation. While these small groups were active, the tutor provided individual, detailed oral feedback to the presenter. Subsequently, on the basis of the small group discussions, respondents asked a number of questions to the presenter. The respondent then had a week to write a short report on both the presentation and discussion. Although formal in approach, this assessment design encouraged active listening, peer-led small-group discussion, and the formation of critical questions. The use of small groups, where the respondent was chair, improved the level of engagement with the presentation and also added a further layer of peer-to-peer discussion.

The summative oral examinations – individual, 10-minutes - were designed to assess how students had developed in their ability to form arguments and talk cogently, as well as listen carefully to questions posed by the examiner. Students were given three questions in advance and knew that one would be the opening question to which they could respond for 2-3 minutes. Thereafter, the questions were seemingly organic, but were actually intended to ensure that the other two questions were tackled for each student. There were two examiners for each oral exam (the module convenor and the tutor) and each session was audio-recorded using 'Mediasite'. 10 minutes were set aside after each examination to allow the examiners to confer on the mark and complete a proforma feedback sheet. This ensured that the oral examination was fresh in the memory and that a consensus was reached for the mark in an efficient manner. One concern raised about the assessment schema concerned external examiner access, but there is written and presentational material available for moderation. In addition, recording

of the examination allowed for later referral, external examiner scrutiny as necessary and, potentially, for students to review their own performance.

Literature Review

As Caspersz and Stasinska (2015) note, students often spend more time listening as a way of learning than they spend speaking, or even reading and writing. Yet, our assessments rarely develop listening as a skill, and there is concern that listening skills are often neglected in university teaching more generally (Thompson et al, 2004, p.226). This may be linked to the difficulty of creating an observable product to assess (Vandergrift, 2004; Lynch, 2011). There is a significant literature on assessing presentational skills and effective ways to do so; what is less common is to consider and assess how students respond to presentations. The notion of 'listening' skills is applied mostly to language students and those who are learning in a non-first language. Nevertheless, the literature does emphasise the importance of 'attentive listening' as a means to process effectively and thus comprehend the information presented to them (Thompson et al, 2004). In the subject of History, we are keen that students take that one stage further and critically appraise the information in order to frame an appropriate response. Students need to be able to extract the main concepts, arguments and evidence in an efficient manner. Listening is also a means to encourage collaborative learning, which is a foundation for many tertiary classrooms in the humanities.

Successes | Challenges | Lessons Learned

The innovative assessment model for this module was designed and developed to highlight oral skills for students, rather than merely pay lip-service to them. The integration of presentation and response, alongside a summative oral exam, reminded students of the need to listen actively as well as to talk. The intent was also to encourage students to make the most of their seminar teaching and thus to foster critical and creative thinking. In particular, we want students to engage in a form of listening that is evaluative and 'transformative' – ie. encouraging a dialogue and an exchange of ideas. The assessment was thus designed as means to encourage level-one students to reflect upon a range of oral skills, as well as the intent of seminar-style teaching. The student evaluations for this module were very positive and, in particular, highlighted the assessment scheme:

- 'I like the way much of the learning was done orally'
- '..just what I needed to experience in my first few months of University' Tutors reported that the overall level of discussion and questioning in the remainder of the seminar was improved as students developed the habit of active listening.

Scalability and Transferability

This type of integrated oral and listening assessment can be transferred into any university-style seminar setting where peer-to-peer discussion is a core learning method. There is a potential cap in the numbers that can be accommodated within a particular seminar group, depending also on the time of the session, since all students must have an opportunity to present, chair a small group, and respond. The oral examinations can be time-consuming and require set times. The assessment method might thus not be suitable for a module with more than 50 students unless the oral examinations can be distributed among staff; though in terms of overall time commitment, the workload is similar to the equivalent essay assessment.

References

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