

Diversifying Assessment

Reviews, reading dossiers, assessing
students in seminars

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Assessing students in seminars

Description of initiative

An alternative option to 'Popular Writing', 'American Modernisms' is also a second level option with an intake of twenty students. Conventional assessment by essay and exam has been replaced by a combination of oral and written assignment. The new assessment strategy is designed to foster the active and collaborative learning practised by tutors in 'Texts and Issues'. The practice also increases the range of transferable skills available to students by testing their ability to communicate research in the form of a presentation.

The unit focuses on a variety of texts produced and consumed in the interwar period in America. This involves the study of the Harlem Renaissance, the writers of the so-called 'lost generation' as well as American women writers' responses to modernism. The unit is one of only four American Literature units available at levels two and three. As such, the tutor does not expect depth of knowledge about American Literature but is looking to build and develop flexible thinking about texts. An introduction to American writing is provided in the first year.

Students are required to give a class presentation on a topic related to themes dealt with in the course. These presentations are given individually and each last between seven and twelve minutes. Presentations are assessed in terms of content and delivery and form 30 per cent of the final mark. The other 70 per cent is by assessed essay. The tutor is looking for clarity of exposition, coherence of argument, evidence of research, effective use of analogy, awareness of, and engagement with, the audience and ability to respond to questions. The students are also given a handout entitled 'Making Presentations' which helps them think about structuring their argument and organising their material, designing overheads and engaging with their audience.

The added value of assessing students in seminars is that it fosters the value of collaborative learning for independent assessment. The students look critically at a particular extract or poem in order to analyse the way in which the text produces a particular way of seeing or saying. They then have to present a case arguing why these details are significant in the context of American Modernism. Assessing presentations formatively also provides opportunities for tutors to feedback early and for students to receive feedback from their peers.

To summarize, the key reasons motivating the tutor to assess group work and presentations are to:

- improve students' capacity to understand and communicate the subject
- develop skills associated with the oral and visual presentation of ideas
- encourage collaborative research
- develop student confidence in presenting an argument.

Assessing students in seminars highlights the role that discussion and presentation can play in helping students to make sense of a subject and to gain confidence in collaborative research practices. In our example, oral work is given a lower weighting than coursework. Its overall impact on degree classification is therefore low. Using oral assessment formatively is, however, a valuable aid to learning. It can pick up misunderstandings early on, and give immediate feedback on ideas and key concepts.

This new approach was developed primarily to improve student academic writing by offering practise in reading texts in context and reflecting on the impact of arguments on peers. The following extract from a handout to students illustrates the kinds of realistic practical advice it is possible to give, with the intention of improving student contribution to debate and the quality of their preparatory reading.

Guidance for class papers

The class papers not only examine your presentation skills but they also provide you with an opportunity to prepare for your essay. Your close reading can be used to develop an argument in response to one of the essay questions or, if you find that your presentation is leading you in an alternative direction, you can produce your own essay question (though you will need to consult with your tutor if you do this). When choosing your extract try to select the text you might want to write an essay on. While you do not have to develop your close reading into an essay, you will save yourself much time and energy if you do so.

When compiling class papers:

- You should include the examination, in detail, of either a poem or an extract from one of the texts being studied on the course.
- You should pay particular attention to the ways in which the piece is written. This should not simply be a summary of the plot.
- You should try to identify the key characteristics of the piece in terms of narrative or poetic technique
- Your presentation should coincide with the seminar session devoted to the text you are analysing. This is very important, since your presentation will provide the class with an important basis for further discussion.

Assessment criteria

- a) Clear expression. You should make sure that the paper is presented clearly so that the audience is able to appreciate your argument.
- b) Coherent structure. Even though you are looking at an extract, there should be a sense of a beginning, a middle and an end. The introduction should outline your argument, the middle section should explicate the argument and the conclusion should provide a summation of the main points and further questions the paper raises.
- c) Critical analysis. This is very important. You should be looking critically at a particular extract or poem in order to analyse the way in which it produces a particular way of seeing or saying. I am looking for attention to detail but also a sense of why these details are significant in the context of American Modernism.
- d) Time management. All papers will be timed and if they exceed twelve minutes, or come under seven minutes, marks will begin to be deducted. You should be aiming at speaking for ten minutes.
- e) Awareness of, and engagement with, the audience. Try to avoid reading the paper out verbatim. You may use notes, but if you familiarize yourself with the material sufficiently, you will be able to look up and talk directly to your audience when you need to.

Impact on students

Interviews with our students suggested that they benefited from the assessment of their presentations. They gained confidence, clarity, an awareness of audience, and an increased sense of the importance of supporting argument with textual analysis. They were also clearly aware of the restrictions which presentations imposed on their material, and were ready to move on to the essay.

'A presentation is relatively short, however, it makes you consider one or two aspects of a novel closely.'

'Doing a presentation helps you to research general themes, then relate them to texts in detail. This is helpful. The only problem is you don't want to make the talk boring so some ideas may be disregarded because they're too long-winded.'

'Because the time limit only allows for certain information to be revealed, it doesn't allow me to express fully my ideas. However, questions and discussions do open up ideas and if key points have been raised a wider context will be developed.'

The language these Northumbria students use to describe the experience of preparing for a presentation shows that they do see oral assessment as a valuable precursor to academic writing:

'Preparation is the same as an assignment. You talk to staff with a set of ideas. Read up in the library. Discuss with your group the structure of the talk. You decide on visual material. You learn, from other groups and past presentations, what works well.'

'I watch tutors delivering lectures and observe any useful things, like pause for effect. I read around the topic and find out which points are dominant as these will be key points to be used. I outline my presentation, consult other members, if needed, and then talk to the tutor in charge to see how it looks. I then practise delivering the presentation, trying to pause, alter the voice tone and be in control of information so it can be delivered directly to the audience.'

Impact on staff

The tutors involved remarked that while students are initially anxious about giving presentations, they do enjoy doing independent research and most of them are happy about being assessed in this way. However, some students do not appear to be interested in hearing other students' presentations and are unwilling to ask questions. This means that the discussion afterwards can be between the unit tutor and the students giving the presentation. Suggestions for avoiding this situation include asking those listening to note down three key points and having a rotating student chair for the ensuing debate. Further examples of tutors assessing students in seminars can be found on the project's Web site at <http://www.unn.ac.uk/assessingenglish>.

The tutor gives feedback independently to the students, who are required to hand in a summary of their contribution to the session and any handouts or notes they made for the session.

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