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Student experience of oral communication assessment tasks online from a multi-disciplinary trial

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Introduction

Universities play a critical role in ensuring that graduates are adequately qualified and prepared for their respective roles as citizens in society and as professionals in vocational life (De Grez *et al.*, 2009a, Heiman *et al.*, 2012, Kerby and Romine, 2013).

Skills in communicating orally are critical for these roles. Yet there is evidence that many university graduates have not acquired oral communication skills necessary for professional settings (Gray, 2010).

Whilst there is increasing awareness of the importance of oral communication skills and there is extensive literature of best practice teaching and assessment for both online learning in general and learning of oral communications skills in general, there is limited research on students’ experiences of learning oral presentation skills specifically in the context of the online or blended learning environment (De Grez *et al.*, 2009b). A brief overview of the literature undertaken by De Grez *et al.*, (2009b) shows that most of the literature focuses on the evaluation/assessment of oral presentations, what should be taught, allaying student anxiety about public speaking and various aspects of the instructional process. However there is lack of research specifically into students’ experiences in technologically-mediated online and blended settings (De Grez *et al.*, 2009a). This is a gap in the literature this paper seeks to begin to address.

A focus on teaching and assessing oral communication skills is especially important given online and blended learning modes are becoming more common (Tsai, 2010). For instance, the strategic plan of the University of Newcastle, where the authors of this article are based, aims to ‘*support the expansion and quality of online and ‘blended’ approaches across 80 per cent of the University’s courses through building*

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3 *academic and professional staff capacity, and the provision of world-class virtual and*
4 *physical learning environments’.*
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7 Teaching oral communication skills online has, until recently, been somewhat
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9 constrained by the availability of technology (hardware, software, internet access) – to
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11 both students and their educational institutions (Reynolds and Mason, 2002).
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13 However, technological limitations are receding rapidly for many students and their
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15 institutions, and the technical barriers to teaching oral communications in online
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17 environments are likely to continue to decrease further for the following reasons.
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20 Firstly, technological restrictions are rapidly reducing; secondly, student and staff
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22 computer use and networking are increasing (Eastmond, 1998); and thirdly, the
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24 technological proficiency of most students, and the younger generation in particular,
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26 is extremely high (Sherer and Shea, 2011).
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30 Increasingly, tertiary teaching and learning quality assurance mechanisms are being
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32 implemented in many countries in the world. Assurance mechanisms, such as the
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34 Tuning Process in Europe (Socrates-Tempus, n.d.) and the Australian Qualifications
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36 Framework (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013), require universities
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38 to demonstrate that students are assessed for generic skills such as the ability to
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40 transmit information to others. In Australia, for example, masters by research students
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42 are required to have “communication and technical skills to present a coherent and
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44 sustained argument and to disseminate research results to specialist and non-specialist
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46 audiences” (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 60). Oral
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48 communication assessment tasks are critical for increasing the proficiency of students
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50 to communicate effectively and for the university to be able to demonstrate student
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52 support in achieving these types of essential graduate attributes.
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There are also pedagogical benefits of teaching oral communication skills in the online setting. Although these benefits may also apply, in part, to the face-to-face learning environment they are likely to be more effective when oral presentations are able to be recorded and re-viewed by students multiple times, thus deepening their learning. For example, the use of visual information (such as video) together with complementary text (for example, journal articles and textbooks) may integrate learning because both types of information can be repeated (i.e. re-seen and re-read) (Mitra *et al.*, 2010), better catering for multiple learning styles at one time. The integration of oral communication skills into course designs that are compatible with oral traditions of learning and teaching has also been shown to provide Aboriginal students with improved student experiences and engagement (Chase *et al.*, 2010, Hughes and More, 1997).

Social learning theory also indicates that students can learn by observation through modelling the behaviour of peers and the development of oral communication skills can assist this process (Liu and Lu, 2012). Such improved engagement with course content may increase the likelihood of deeper learning. Rather than single loop learning (learning of new skills, practices and actions), the use of multiple learning styles, multiple senses and the need to communicate these in a form that is different from more traditional written assessment tasks, open up the possibility that students may reflect on the deeper meaning of content throughout the implementation of the assessment task. This, in turn, opens the opportunity for questioning, challenging and possibly changing the underlying values of the student (double loop learning) (Argyris and Schon, 1974) in relation to the course content, as well as improve their competence and confidence in undertaking oral communication assessment tasks themselves.

Although oral communication skills are highly desired in the workforce, it is important for tertiary educators to be aware of which particular skills are valued. For instance, Gray (2010) found that although a wide range of oral communication skills were important to accountancy professionals in New Zealand, listening skills are much more valued than formal and informal presentation skills using visual aids such as PowerPoint. Formal presentation skills may not be a desired skill in new graduates who are unlikely to have to make high level internal or external presentations; however, they may be highly relevant for postgraduate students who are already employed in the field and are upgrading their qualifications for career advancement. Students need skills that are relevant to the professional settings they will join after graduation. They also need skills for which there will be greater demand in the future. Although the relevance of face-to-face oral presentations in many professional settings is clear, the increased prevalence of remote communications channels such as Skype, video and teleconferencing, webinars and other virtual ways of communicating means that graduates will also need skills in presenting information in online settings. One example is the growing demand for tele-health services in rural areas where medical specialists are not able to physically examine patients. Online and blended learning environments offer particular strengths in preparing students for this type of context.

In this research we undertook an empirical, qualitative, exploratory study of the student experience of undertaking oral communications skills assessment tasks online to inform the quality of teaching and assessment. By reflecting upon the student experience in a systematic way we, as instructors, both aimed to support our own learning of how to teach and, subsequently, to develop guidance on critical considerations required when designing and teaching Online Oral Communications

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Assessment Tasks (OOCATS) for others also wishing to do so. Using a broad range of different assessment tasks meant that this guidance was not specific to a particular discipline or type of assessment task but applicable to assessing oral communications tasks online broadly. This type of reflective teaching is consistent with Brookfield’s critical reflection in teaching practice (Brookfield 1995) which uses the ‘student lense’ to support enhanced teaching (Phelan 2012).

Other studies investigating student experience in online learning generally highlight a range of different types of student experience which could inform teaching including considerations of course design, learner motivation, time management, comfort with online technologies, sense of community and time constraints (Song, Singleton et al. 2004, Kyong-Jee, Shijuan et al. 2005, Symeonides and Childs 2015). Although these studies can, and should, inform the design of oral communications assessment tasks they do not highlight the specific considerations that instructors may need to make to cater for the diverse needs of their students.

It is important to be clear that this focus on student experience does not allow us to extrapolate about student learning outcomes directly (other than self-reported learning experiences directly from student experience), despite some evidence for a link between student learning and student experience of learning (Dwyer and Davidson 2013). We limit our aims here to investigating how the student experience can inform teaching approaches and considerations. Such a focus takes us away from research on online learning, which generally investigates the pedagogical benefits and limitations of the e-learning environment (a teacher focused approach). Instead, this research examines the perceptions and experiences of students – an approach which helps us to step beyond our teacher-centred view and the assumptions that come with that (Sharpe and Benfield 2005). It allows the instructor to learn about the full diversity of

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3 student experience, which is typically highly varied (Sharpe and Benfield 2005,
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5 Gilbert, Morton et al. 2007, Phelan 2012), and in this way informs teaching practice
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7 beyond instructor held assumptions about their students and how they learn best
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10 (Sharpe and Benfield 2005).

11 12 13 14 15 *Aims*

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19 The aim of the research was to understand the experiences of students undertaking
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21 online oral communication assessment tasks (OOCATs). We undertook this research
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23 in order to confirm that oral communications skills can be taught and assessed online,
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25 across a range of disciplines and with a variety of assessment task designs. This study,
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27 therefore, does not compare experiences across learning modes, disciplines or types of
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29 online assessment tasks. Rather, it seeks to build recommendations and guidance of
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31 high quality teaching of oral communications skills online more broadly. This project
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33 evaluated the student experience of the teaching and assessment of virtual
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35 synchronous and asynchronous oral presentation skills in a range of online and
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39 blended tertiary learning contexts. The trial was multi-disciplinary, covering a total of
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41 eight different disciplines. This study reports on the qualitative data collected from
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43 students as part of this trial. The findings presented here are part of a larger research
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45 project which also investigated the current status and use of OOCATs at the authors'
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47 University, the quantitative analysis of students' experiences undertaking OOCATs,
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50 and the experiences of lecturers taking part in the trial.
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Methods

Participants and Procedures

Participant lecturers each designed an online oral communication task that aligned with the learning objectives and learning activities of each of their very divergent courses. Courses from eight disciplines were part of the trial (business, education, speech pathology, science and engineering, health sciences, nutrition and dietetics, geography and environmental studies and psychology). The courses included both under-graduate and post-graduate as well as blended and fully online study. A variety of online oral communication tasks were developed to account for different goals of each course (Chao *et al.*, 2012) including group, individual, synchronous and asynchronous tasks. A range of software options were also used including video uploads, YouTube, Blackboard Collaborate, audio Microsoft PowerPoint presentations and YouSeeU presentations. Table 1 lists the varied tasks and software options used in each course. Each assessment task was unique in each course. For example, the assessments included tasks such as a recorded dietary history interview between a ‘client’ and the student; a viva exam to demonstrate educational knowledge, recorded continuing professional education style presentations and; recorded Pecha Kucha PowerPoint presentations (McBain 2015) to communicate complex environmental information.

Note, we did not analyse differences between different delivery modes, software, disciplines or assessment tasks. We combined all data about student experience from all the different assessment tasks to explore the student experience of undertaking online oral communications tasks in general.

This study used a cross sectional design, employing an anonymous questionnaire to collect student perceptions about undertaking the assessment tasks. This survey assessed student perceptions and opinions of their experiences of OOCATs in the courses they were undertaking.

Students enrolled in ten course offerings in 2013, (3 undergraduate and 7 postgraduate) across all five faculties at the University, who were completing an OOCAT using the aforementioned range of software applications for the task were invited to participate in the survey.

A total of 124 students from ten courses across Business, Education, Engineering, Geography and Environmental Studies, Health Sciences, Nutrition and Dietetics, Psychology, and Speech Pathology completed the survey giving a 23.8% response rate. Of these 56.5% (n=70) were female and 43.5% (n=54) were male. Only 7% (n=9) of students had English as a second language. The majority of students were in their first year of postgraduate study (44.4% n=55) followed by second year postgraduate students (21.8% n=27), third year undergraduate (19.4% n=24), first year undergraduate (6.5% n=8), second year undergraduate (5.6% n=7) and fourth year undergraduate (2.4% n=3). Students respondents had a mean age of 32.85 years (SD = 8.57).

Data collection

A survey link was emailed to all students ($N = 521$) enrolled in the ten participating courses. Students were informed that no identifying information would be collected and no participation incentives were provided. Consent was implied with completion of the survey. The survey included open-ended author-created items based on

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Brookfield’s Critical Incident Questionnaire, designed to help lecturers understand their students’ leaning experiences (Brookfield, 1995). We drew on Brookfield’s CIQ because it provides a way to access rich insight into students’ individual and diverse learning experiences. The open ended structure of the Brookfield’s questions are useful for encouraging students to reflect critically on their experiences undertaking the oral communications assessment tasks and eliciting a description of that experience (Phelan 2012). The use of Brookfield’s open ended questions also lines up well with our exploratory approach because it allows the research to determine the findings – not the other way around. Lastly, the open ended Brookfield’s questions contrast with the remaining categorical Likert scale questions which collected demographic data about technological familiarity, gender, age and level of education and provided some context for student experience. The questions used were:

1. At what moment during the task did you feel most engaged?
2. At what moment during the task did you feel most distanced?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took was most affirming or helpful for completing the task?
4. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took was most puzzling or confusing for completing the task?
5. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in in relation to the task surprised you the most?

Data analysis

This paper presents the findings from the open-ended questions which were uploaded into NVivo 10 for analysis (QSR International 2012). The researchers read the transcripts of the open ended questions and inductively coded these into relevant and meaningful key themes, categories and issues (Bowling 2002). In accordance with the exploratory approach, key themes were checked for “confirming and disconfirming evidence” within the data set, in order to check the validity of the interpretation (Freeman, deMarrais et al. 2007).

The data was also auto-coded for survey question relating to demographic data (age, year of study, gender, English as a second language, comfort with computers). Matrix queries were used to investigate the number of students making particular comments.

These results are presented as the percentage of students in a particular demographic group (gender, age categories and level of education) responding for each of the categorised themes.

Findings

As noted previously, there is lack of research specifically into students' experiences in technologically-mediated online and blended settings. This section therefore draws on the student experience in order to contribute new insights to this gap in the literature.

Five main themes were identified in the analysis of the qualitative data relating to the use of an online oral communication assessment task. These were, in no particular order: relevance, capacity, technology, time and support. Although the five themes identified by student feedback are discussed somewhat separately below, it is actually the holistic application of all five that will support the best outcomes for student learning (see the point of intersection in figure 1).

Relevance

Although the task was challenging for some students, many could see that it was relevant for their professional development and tertiary learning as the following quotes indicate: *"The learning gained from oral presentation was fabulous. It is a skill we all need to learn - to be concise and succinctly communicate our knowledge/information to others in a format easily understood"*; and from another

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student *“Great assessment because you can experience first-hand what you look like in the interview process. Good for reflection and professional development.”* The use of oral communication skills also contributes variety for different learning styles as illustrated by the following comment *“I think this is a wonderful way of teaching, reading at times can become overwhelming and a visual format of learning provides a greater balance for all styles of learning.”*

Using alternate approaches to student learning also seemed to commonly promote greater engagement with course material: *“I really enjoyed this experience and feel the process really promotes greater learning as there is a pictorial association with the transcript. The ability to reflect on words with visual aids really has a positive effect. I highly recommend this process for all educational programs’* and *‘It broke up the monotony of always writing essays and I appreciated the creative side of putting it together.”*

However, a small minority of students (2%) perceived the oral communication assessment task to contribute little to their tertiary learning. Of these few, most note the inability of an ‘artificial’ online presentation to contribute valid learning relating to the development of presentations skills to a face-to-face audience, as the following student quote illustrates: *“Presenting to a computer is not the same as presenting to a room full of people.”*

Student Self Assessed Capacity for OOCATs

Students reported varying capacity and engagement to undertake their assessment task. Overall, 24% of students explicitly reported experiencing limitations in their own capacity in undertaking the OOCAT. In contrast, 27% of students explicitly reported never experiencing difficulties undertaking the task. Undergraduate students

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3 were more likely to report limitations in their own capacity to undertake the task than
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5 postgraduate students (29% vs 22%) although differences were not great and rates of
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7 anxiety were not high overall. Female students were more likely than male students to
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9 describe themselves as limited in their ability to undertake the task (29% female vs
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11 16% male). Capacity to complete this task is highlighted in this quote: *“Trying to*
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13 *interface with software and technology I had no previous experience with”* which
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15 contrasts with another student indicating: *“The simplicity of the task.”*
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19 Some students found certain aspects of the task particularly engaging. These included
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21 planning and preparation; editing the presentation; recording the presentation and/or;
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23 conducting the interview as can be seen in the following student responses when
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25 asked when they felt most engaged with the task: *“When conducting the diet history,*
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27 *and recording it”*; *“When merging each of the individual videos, when everything*
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29 *was coming together”*; and *“Watching the video and editing it.”* The following
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31 student comment clarifies engagement: *“At every instant from start to finish. To be*
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33 *open, this type of technology is very useful for everyone to participate and helps*
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35 *unlock their academic and team skills in order to attain their chosen careers.”* In
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37 contrast other students did not have the same experience: *“I did not like the*
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39 *filming/editing/uploading element. I am not very good at computers and I had never*
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41 *edited a film in my life, so I found that incredibly challenging.”*
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45 Only 7% of students report feelings of anxiety as a result of having to undertake the
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47 assessment task. As one student commented: *“I was surprised how stressed out this*
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49 *assessment task made me.”* Undergraduate students were more likely than
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51 postgraduate students to report feeling anxious about understanding the task (17% UG
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53 vs 2% PG); females were more anxious than male students (10% female vs 3% male).
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Conversely students in the older age category (>40 years) reported less anxiety associated with the task.

Of those students who undertook the task as group work or presented their work to their peers, many reported high levels of engagement and learning, as the following student comments in relation to engagement illustrate: *“Organising the presentation plan and technical details with my team”* and *“I enjoyed making the presentation and seeing the discussion afterwards.”* This noted however, teamwork did pose some additional issues for students. Postgraduate students were more critical of a lack of teamwork amongst peers than undergraduate students (13% vs 5%) and male students reported greater difficulty with teamwork or interactions with their student colleagues (16% males vs 8% females).

Although some students reported feeling uncomfortable at various stages of the task, only one student noted a lack of engagement throughout the entire task. Several students related disengagement before beginning the task as a result of having to read instructions and understand what needed to be done or being somewhat daunted by the task as noted by this student comment: *“Daunted by the task at first, but really enjoyed it, and really learnt from it.”*

A few students also reported some awkwardness with ‘talking to themselves’ and some self-consciousness, at least initially, at being recorded as the following quotes illustrates: *“The recording of the presentation was a difficult aspect. I am comfortable providing presentations however; recording myself was a new concept. This was very difficult, and I found myself making many versions of the presentation to get it right.”* and: *“How self-conscious I felt while recording.”*

The following student quote emphasises the development of student capacity as a result of this learning task: *“Having done a YouSeeU presentation now I would feel*

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3 *more comfortable with doing a second - even excited; however, the initial task*
4 *presented great anxiety, took up much time in attempting to video and almost resulted*
5 *in divorce.”*
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8 9 10 11 12 13 *Technological Challenges Experienced by Students* 14

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16 Generally the technological difficulties experienced by students were low (12%, 7%
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18 and 10% of students reported difficulties with hardware; internet and; general
19 technical difficulties respectively). Issues relating to home computing hardware
20 included inadequate sound or video recording facilities. As one student commented:
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22 *“I did not have a means to record the task, and when I did the technology was very*
23 *old and the sound and picture quality was terrible, which I think will GREATLY affect*
24 *how my communication skills were interpreted.”*
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28 Limitations in hardware and software combined were also an issue for some. For
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30 instance: *“I think I had limited administrative rights [on my work computer] to*
31 *complete the task. The video would not play all the way through.”*
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35 Several students also worried that the assessment of their oral communication task
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37 would be affected by technological restrictions which affected how ‘pleasant’ or
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39 ‘entertaining’ their work was.
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43 However, considerably higher numbers of students experienced challenges related to
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45 software (24%). Compatibility issues between Mac and Windows was a factor that
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47 limited the sharing of oral communications output and/or the time required by
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49 students to successfully undertake the assessment task. Several students made
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51 comments, such as *“Using a mac - there was limited functionality for compressing*
52 *audio files”* and *“Issues with compatibility.”* Other software barriers identified by
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students included difficulty accessing the user interface, complications associated with large file size and frustration in their own technical capacity to use new software or hardware, as the following quotes illustrates: *“Just lack of experience with recording and editing”* and *“Computer illiteracy skills frustrating.”*

Restriction in internet bandwidth was identified as the main technological barrier for students living in rural areas. As one student commented: *“I live in a rural area where I can only use mobile internet, which is fairly unreliable for uploading/downloading large files.”* Limited internet bandwidth required some students to physically access university facilities (an obvious restriction for those not located near campus). As a student noted: *“Inadequate internet capability!! Massive issue, video would not load at home, and took a lot of time for it to work on campus... was so stressful, particularly when we had put so much effort into the task.”*

Demographic differences are also evident in relation to technology. Although the rates overall are low, female students tended to experience more limitations in relation to the capacity of their hardware (10% female vs 3% males) and reported more issues with software (45% female vs 23% male). When compared to undergraduate (UG) students, postgraduate (PG) students were more likely to report issues with their software (32% PG vs 24% UG); however, these differences were marginal. Those in the older age group (>40 years) reported no difficulties with internet access, compared to some reports from younger age categories (9% and 10% for <30 years and 30-40 years, respectively). General technical issues also tended to decrease with student age (13%, 2% and 0% with increasing age categories); however, reporting of issues relating to the software increased with student age (21%, 27%, 34% with increasing age category).

Time

The time required to complete the online oral communication assessment task was discussed by students; however, only 15% of students highlighted time as a significant constraint or challenge in undertaking the task. Postgraduate students were more likely to experience issues with time limitations compared to undergraduate students (18% vs 7%) and male students found time issues to be a greater difficulty than female students (21% males vs 12% females).

Some discussion related to the amount of time required in comparison to the value of the assessment overall, as one student noted: *“It wasn't an issue of distance, but time. For a 10% grade, it took 10 times longer to complete an online oral presentation than writing an entire 3,000 word essay including research. Not worth the input of time for output of marks and grading.”*

Other students reported negatively on the amount of time compared to other more traditional assignments, as the following comment illustrates: *“With all the preparation of scripts and slides, messaging other group members, setting up for filming, recording video, editing video, registering with websites, uploading files, etc. etc. I spent many hours on this task, but it didn't contribute much to my learning at all. I could have used the time much more effectively on almost any other kind of assessment task.”*

Similarly, *“no one seemed to know what needed to be saved where and by whom and using the two online systems added un-needed complexity and wasted students time that could have been used to study the course material”* and: *“The time taken to bring the overall presentation together was of no benefit to the learning outcomes, it was more a logistical exercise.”* In contrast however another student commented: *“The*

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only barrier I experienced was lack of time. This was not due to the course lay out, but from my own making.”

Support for Students

Students identified many factors that contributed to their success in completing the oral communication assessment tasks. Very few students (2%) reported experiencing poor lecturer support whilst undertaking the task and only 14% of students found the instructions for undertaking the task unclear. The value of clear examples, which either demonstrated what the final result might look like or clearly demonstrated how to undertake the technical aspects of the task, were clearly identified by students as important. For instance *“A student did her presentation early which set a level of expectation.”* The use of examples was also highlighted as being important to both undergraduate and postgraduate students (14% and 6% respectively). Support from the lecturer was also valued, especially encouragement, clear instructions and timely feedback to allay any student fears or concerns. However, undergraduate students were more likely to report limitations in support from the lecturer compared to their postgraduate peers (19% UG vs 11% PG found instructions to be less clear). Interestingly, when considering the three age categories (>40 years; 30-40 years and <30 years), more students in the 30-40 year age category reported positive experiences with facilitator support (78%) compared to 38% of the younger students and 29% of the older students. Male students also reported more facilitator support than their female counterparts (68% vs 46%). Students noted that: *“The Lecturer is always pretty encouraging about using new technology, even if it is only for the sake of getting to know the technology. That's very helpful in overcoming any concerns*

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3 about using the technology” and “Professor was helpful redirecting to technical staff
4 and providing instructions on task.”
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7 The timely response from both the facilitator and the software supplier was also noted
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9 as helpful as the following quotes indicate: “They [software supplier] seemed to be
10 instantaneous in responding and the pressure isn't there when your questions are
11 answered in a timely manner” and “just one technological hiccup, service from
12 lecturer and company was swift and helpful.”
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17 Students also identified the benefits of peer support; acknowledging the support of
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19 other students to manage technology and sharing tips from those who had already
20 completed the task: “sharing a few pointers from a fellow student who had reviewed
21 what to do to complete the task” and “advice from another student in compiling and
22 uploading the video.” However, it is also noted that student learning depended on the
23 way tasks were allocated in a group. Some students who did not do a particular aspect
24 of the oral communication task (e.g. uploading the file) did not gain skills in this
25 particular sub-task. For instance: “The expertise with the actual tech side was left up
26 to the rest of group.”
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43 Discussion

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45 The findings from this research indicate that overall student experience of OOCATs
46 were extremely positive for their learning. The difficulties experienced by students
47 undertaking the task were, on the whole, very low. It is clear from our investigation
48 that teaching oral communications tasks online can be done so successfully. However,
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55 as with most studies utilising student feedback, it is clear that students experienced
56 the same information differently, depending on their past experience and background.
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The diversity of student responses in this study is clear, with some students expressing surprise at the simplicity of the oral communication tasks asked of them and others surprise at the level of stress they experienced.

It is this diversity of student experience which we as instructors must consider if we are to support as many students in the overall cohort as possible in their learning. Understanding the fundamental aspects of what students think hinders or facilitates their learning means that we are able to make multiple adjustments in our online teaching which address a range of both real and perceived issues.

In our study, five very clear themes were reported to influence the student experience of doing oral communications tasks online: relevance, capacity, technology, time and support. It is important to highlight all of these themes despite the fact some, e.g. the provision of sufficient student support and understanding the time requirement of learning new tasks, may be considered attributes of best practice in all teaching. This is because the student experience in this trial challenged some of the assumptions we as instructors had made about our students, their capabilities and their resources – all of which affected their ability to undertake the assessment task. This understanding is important in the interests of student equity.

For instance, our findings indicate that some students still have physical limitations relating to hardware and that internet connection speed could disadvantage some students in undertaking online oral communication assessment tasks. For example, students based in rural areas and in emerging and developing countries. Given the large file sizes associated with recording oral communication tasks this will continue to be an issue facing student equity into the near future and it is important that these students are not disadvantaged in their assessment of online oral communication tasks. Providing alternative tasks such as allowing students to submit a written

transcript of what they *would* say in lieu of a recording, more time to submit assessment tasks, or allowing students to record their presentations to compact disk or flash drive and mailing it are some alternatives. Despite the assumption for improved student access to technology it is important that we as instructors are aware that this is does not pertain to all students.

Understanding how and when students feel *disengagement* during different stages of the assessment task is also important. Student discomfort with a task may reflect their unfamiliarity with it - although uncomfortable, this is inherently part of building capacity. For instance, students reporting disengagement at the beginning of an assessment may feel daunted by a task and the new skills it demands, but once planning and preparation begins this disengagement may decrease.

We found students who report disengagement with the actual recording of their oral presentations also questioned the relevance of the task for face-to-face presentations, noting that online presentations were too artificial to represent the reality of talking in front of people. However, these students' comments may reflect an assumption that oral presentations are only ever made in face-to-face contexts. In likely reality, virtual oral presentations may be increasingly vocationally relevant as virtual meetings, virtual job interviews and conferences become more common. It may be beneficial for facilitators to explore such assumptions with students, since not seeing the relevance of an assessment task could influence student engagement, performance and ultimately, their learning. Further, in both online and blended contexts, there is pedagogical and double loop learning advantage over face-to-face contexts in students being encouraged to record, view and rerecord their presentations until they are satisfied with the quality of their delivery.

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It is important to note that some demographic groups may require slightly more support in undertaking such a task. For instance, undergraduate students, females, younger students and those less comfortable using computers all reported a greater incidence of experiencing anxiety. Similarly, undergraduate students and female students also reported negative experiences as a result of their perceived existing capacity to undertake the task. In contrast postgraduate students, males, those in the 30-40 year age group, and those confident with the use of computers were more likely to report never having negative experiences associated with undertaking the task, and thus are less likely to require extra facilitator support. It is important to note that self-reporting of anxiety is likely to reflect less confidence rather than less competence (Cooper, 2006) and appropriate support should be directed accordingly.

Two themes which students highlighted as important for completing the oral communication tasks were 1) having clear examples of what was expected and 2) support from the facilitator. Having a clear demonstration of how to undertake the task and what the final result might look like gave students confidence. This seemed to be particularly valued by undergraduate students, younger students and those less comfortable using computers.

Similarly, lecturer support (through clear instructions, encouragement and quick response times) was particularly appreciated in the 30-40 year age group and by postgraduate students who are typically studying part-time and juggling family, work and other life commitments (Carroll *et al.*, 2009). Males, in particular, also tended to value facilitator support. In contrast, undergraduates seemed to be more likely to report negative experiences resulting from the perception that instructions given to them were unclear.

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3 Students also valued support from their peers and there is a clear role for lecturers in
4 encouraging collegiality among students in online learning environments in order to
5 support student learning (Phelan, 2012). Postgraduates, males and those more
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7 comfortable using computers were more likely to report having negative experiences
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9 resulting from lack of teamwork between peers and greater direction and
10 encouragement of this group could support their greater engagement with the learning
11 task.
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17 One of the big issues raised by students in relation to learning oral communications
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19 online was the demanding time requirement. Postgraduate students tended to report
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21 more issues with time, presumably because they are more likely to be studying part-
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23 time around other life/work commitments. Males also tended to report more time
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25 limitations than females but for unknown reasons.
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28 Collaborative development of oral communication tasks across different courses
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30 within the same overall program also provides an opportunity for students to build on
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32 earlier learning and fine tune skills. Further, it allows for an incremental building of
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34 skills from simpler to more complex tasks (Kerby and Romine, 2013).
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37 It is also clear from the study that using oral communication assessment tasks that
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39 diverge from more traditional written assessments help students better engage with
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41 course content by catering for different student learning styles, encouraging
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43 participatory and interactive learning and encouraging greater reflection. All of these
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45 approaches are consistent with what Herrington and Herrington (2006) call a more
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50 'authentic learning' environment. They argue that explicit articulation of knowledge
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52 and understanding is critical to deeper student learning because articulating and
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54 defending information to peers enables the formation, awareness, development and
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56 refinement of thought which must precede deeper student learning.
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This research indicates that the risks associated with the implementation of online learning assessments tasks can be minimised through attentiveness to student feedback. In paying particular attention to the differences in student experiences we are able to explore the assumptions that we, as instructors, hold about our students and how they learn. This in turn is likely to minimise the creation of any inadvertent student disadvantage. Adopting such an approach assists educators to become more reflexive to the nuanced needs of our students. It is also possible to strategically use knowledge of student demographics in our courses to understand which aspects of teaching require extra focus. Our findings indicate, for instance, that a student cohort of undergraduate students, or with significant proportion of females or younger students, may benefit from extra instructor support and encouragement to allay anxiety which may impede their learning experience. Adopting customised teaching approaches such as these, may mean that some students are not inadvertently disadvantaged by teaching approaches informed by pedagogy only.

Oral communications assessment tasks online show promise not only in making the online learning environment more engaging and interactive but also more relevant to student learning. This trial indicates that further research in the application of OOCATs in vocational learning and professional development is also warranted.

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58 enhance motivation to learn.
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Course Name	PG or UG		Stud. Nos		M/F	Task type	Software	% Value
	Mode							
Globalisation Trimester 1	PG	Online	86	48/38		Group PPT presentation	YouSeeU	10
Globalisation Trimester 3 Learners, learning, and teaching Complex Communication Needs 1 Science and Professional Communication	PG	Online	106	66/40		Group PPT presentation	PowerPoint	10
	PG	blended	115	34/81		Ind. PPT presentation	YouSeeU	15
	UG	blended	82	0/82		Case scenario & viva exam	YouSeeU	40
Occupational Rehabilitation	UG	Online	40	22/18		YouTube presentation	YouTube	13
Dietetic Practice Sustainability & Ecosystem Health	PG	Online	52	27/25		Pecha Kucha	PowerPoint	30
Environmental Management	PG	Online	57	33/24		Pecha Kucha	PowerPoint Video	30
Interviewing & Assessment	PG	Online	4	2/2		Motivational Interview	upload	10