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Assessing Student Contribution in Class: in quest of a reliable and transparent method

Richard Evans
Faculty of Humanities, Languages, Arts and Education
London Metropolitan University

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Introduction

This paper suggests a more reliable and transparent assessment strategy for assessing the “contribution in class” element found in most BA journalism modules at London Metropolitan University. It examines the relative merits of peer and self-assessment, critically reflects on the outcomes of assessment and considers implications for practice.

Since autumn 2009, assessment of most undergraduate journalism modules at London Metropolitan University includes a component for “contribution in class”, worth 25% of the total mark awarded. Whilst precise description varies, the element is typically describe thus (from the second year Employability Module HJ2E06N):

“Oral class contribution (25%) will be assessed on regular, courteous and relevant participation in class discussion, small-group work and self-presentation in class”.

Journalism modules typically teach up to 90 students, grouped into workshop classes of around 20. These weekly workshops can involve a variety of teaching methods and activities over two or three hours. At the end of each semester, marks for the contribution element are currently awarded to each student on an impressionistic basis with reference to attendance figures.

The current assessment strategy appears to conflict with quality systems, particularly with regard to reliability and transparency. The London Metropolitan *University Assessment Framework* (2010: 6) requires

- Consistency among assessors in the marking of student work against relevant criteria
- Grade descriptors and criteria for each assessment should be...available to students and staff.

The framework also suggests that students should receive clear and focused feedback on their in-class assessments. At present they get none. This paper, therefore, suggests a new assessment system consistent with our institutional quality systems.

Merits of the “class contribution” method of assessment

Academic opinion on the wisdom and value of assessing class participation is deeply divided. Jacobs and Chase (1992: 195) suggest that it can “contaminate” the grade as a measure of course achievement:

“ Interpretation of student behaviour is difficult and subjective; participation often depends on a student’s personality, thus disadvantaging shy or introverted students; record-keeping is problematic; participation scores for a given individual are hard to justify if challenged”.

Armstrong (1978: 93) identifies a number of undesirable effects of assessment of class participation, suggesting it disadvantages students who are inexperienced at public speaking, creates student anxiety, encourages over-participation and tends to be unfairly assessed.

On the other hand, Jones (2008: 60) however, identifies a number of areas of intent behind assessment of class participation including accountability with regard to required reading, involvement of more learners in class discussion, stimulating recall of information, thinking and grappling with ideas. Armstrong (1978: 186) moreover suggests that allocation of marks for oral contribution can

“motivate students to prepare for classes, emphasize the importance of the classroom as a source of learning, encourage more widespread participation in discussion and develop skills in argument”.

The study and practice of journalism requires the development of a number of these skills and attributes, particularly confidence and skills in argument. Alongside discussion of academic literature, discussion of contemporary news and current affairs issues is particularly important and often difficult to develop because students often do not consume enough news. Therefore assessment of class contribution was considered a potentially useful and appropriate method of developing higher levels of learning on the BA Journalism course.

Review of current University practice

Brown, Bull and Pendlebury (1997, p.48) suggest that design of effective assessment tasks can be time-consuming. Hence, they suggest looking through assignments set in comparative courses as a starting point. In following that advice, this study gained assistance from the Assistant Academic Registrar at London Metropolitan, Chris Marshall, who identified, for comparative purposes, a number of courses which

involve assessment of contribution in class, including Politics and International Relations, History, English Language Studies and Law. The majority of these involve assessment of performance in specific tasks, rather than longitudinal participation in class. English Language Studies, for example, uses a system introduced after pressure from their external examiner. Ten per cent of the marks are awarded for class contribution in some modules consisting of an attendance element (four per cent) and two specific activities in seminars (three per cent each). This seems to be characteristic of practice in general. A review of published work failed to find a template not structured specifically around presentations, group tasks or production of learning logs or diaries.

In a study at the University of New South Wales, Armstrong (1978, p.190) identified the assessment of two types of class contribution: “spontaneous contribution” and “contributions for which students had advance notice”, in each case by the awarding of points on a subjective basis. Whilst nominating students to prepare a particular topic gave quieter students a chance, using both types of assessment motivated students to prepare and participate in class.

From this review, it was clear that a new assessment strategy for assessing student contribution in class needed to:

- be adequate for the needs of individual tutors whilst still providing reliable and valid marks;
- support a variety of learning environments.;
- encourage higher levels of learning amongst the diverse student body of London Met.

Design of assessment criteria

Moon (2002, p.16) says that assessment criteria may be developed from the learning outcomes or from the assessment method or task, but in either case they should relate to the learning outcomes. It is potentially problematic, then, that none of the validated learning outcomes of the journalism modules under consideration contain explicit reference to a requirement to participate in class. For the purpose of this study, it has been assumed that the class participation element of the assessment relates to London Metropolitan's collective graduate attributes such as effective communication, confidence and esteem, as referenced in the validated course specification.

Design of criteria regarding class contribution involves considering what behaviour students – and, indeed, tutors - should exhibit in an ideal class. Armstrong and Baud (1983, p.39) suggest that choice of criteria can have an important effect on class discussion:

“Students, for instance, may be encouraged to make creative and imaginative contributions to discussion if the teacher stresses that originality is an important

factor. In making criteria known to students the teacher is therefore telling the students what is desirable participation in class discussion”.

Bean and Peterson (1998, p.38) suggest negotiating grading criteria with students:

“The Instructor can ask the class to think of times when class discussion has gone well for them and ask them questions such as ‘What were the features of those discussions’ ‘What behaviours did students exhibit’ ‘What was the professors role’”.

This technique would seem appropriate to students with prior experience of classroom discussion. Production of new criteria or discussion of issues such as weighting of marks could further increase student’s sense of engagement and ownership of the process. However, producing new grading schedules for each class for each semester would be considered unfeasible by tutors, so that the task in this study was to construct a scheme in light of good practice evidenced in the literature and approaches used in other courses.

A cogent and relevant model was offered by Boud & Tyree (1995, p.96) who had asked a group of Australian Law students to analyse and classify criteria for assessing class participation. They categorised the results as follows:

- characteristics of an individual's contribution (Cognitive: logic, objectivity, knowledge, creativity. Expressive: clarity, fluency, conciseness. Affective: enthusiasm, interest);
- contribution to the process of learning (recognition of the responses to others, constructive criticism, contribution to group climate, relevance).
- inferred preparation (amount, consistency, timeliness);
- attendance.

These criteria are considered appropriate to the study of journalism, which encourages qualities such as creativity, clarity, fluency, conciseness and collaborative working. Tutors often stress the importance of journalism being “a team sport”. Just as students can take on different roles in teamwork (such as innovator, evaluator, chairperson, organiser) students can often take on different roles within class discussions.

Under the current strategy, the attendance element accounts for the majority of the total mark -- 80 or 90 per cent. However Armstrong and Baud (1983, p.39) suggest that “*while attendance is an attractive measure because it can be scored so easily and accurately, measurement of attendance has nothing to do with the quality of participation*”.

Attendance in class is a prerequisite for engagement, yet it would be undesirable to award high grades to students who turn up and remain silent or non-participatory. Whilst attendance is reliable, its weighting needs to be substantially reduced to encourage higher levels of participation and learning.

With regards to student diversity it was thought important to identify criteria which are flexible enough to take account of the consequently diverse nature of contribution in class. Gopinath (1999, p.11) points out that the personality of some students may inhibit them from speaking up in class whilst other students may have gone through educational systems in which class participation was not encouraged. Conversely, mature students' contribution to class discussion can be stronger than their written work. A key principle here, articulated in the London Met *University Assessment Framework* (2010, p.6) is that “[e]ach course should employ an appropriate range of methods of assessment to enable students to demonstrate/apply their knowledge, understanding and abilities”.

One possibility is a class blog or message board, which would allow students who are less confident in class to obtain credit for evidence of appropriate contribution. In addition, in order to recognise the validity of a diverse range of contributions, individual students could be allowed to choose four or five possible categories on which they wished to be assessed besides attendance.

Based on the review of the literature and the comparison of practice, the following list of criteria was drawn up:

- Attendance at more than seven workshop sessions
- Evidence of frequent, clear, creative, concise and relevant participation in class discussions
- Evidence of consistent knowledge and analysis of academic literature in class
- Evidence of consistent knowledge and analysis of contemporary national and international news and current affairs in class
- Evidence of regular, constructive and creative collaboration with other group members
- Evidence of frequent, timely constructive and relevant contributions to class blogs or message boards

In line with the *University Assessment Framework* and informed by Moon's (2002) guidelines for best practice, these were developed into a series of grade descriptors with clear threshold standards, attached in Appendix A

Selection of assessor

Since delivery of journalism modules generally involves one tutor teaching a group of students, available sources of judgement are tutor assessment, self-assessment and peer-assessment. When selecting such sources, an overriding consideration must be the effect of the assessment process on the learning environment. Armstrong and Baud (1983, p.40) highlight the increased strain which evaluation of student contributions in class places on tutors:

“Teachers functioning as an observer, participator and facilitator of discussion cannot conduct classes effectively and assess students' contributions at the same time”.

It was considered unfeasible to burden students with a dual assessment role of both peer and self-assessment. While Boud and Tyree (1995, p.175) highlight the benefits of self-assessment in encouraging students to become reflective and self-critical learners, with regard to peer-assessment, however, they suggest that it is unlikely that one person can give sufficiently detailed and useful feedback to more than a few others. Further grounds for caution were found in a study of business students in Suffolk University in the USA, which concluded that whilst peer assessment provided feedback to instructors and students, it suffered from low reliability, was resisted by students and not recommended for grading purposes (Gopinath 1999, p.13). Thus, we decided to rule out peer-assessment.

With regard to tutor assessment, Armstrong and Baud (1983, p.36) suggest that teacher's personal likes and dislikes and issues such as age, race or gender can influence the judgement of a student's oral performance. Other factors highlighted by Gopinath (1999, p.11) relate to the assessment of quantity or quality and of effort or outcome:

“A student who is aggressive and speaks frequently may make a better impression than one who speaks occasionally but has significant points to make”.

To challenge these impressions and moderate the burden of assessment on tutors, we will require students to complete a self-assessment form which asks them to give a reflective account of three appropriate contributions. Tutors will moderate these papers and give feedback to students, a process which, although summative for the module, would be formative for the course as a whole. As part of the process, tutors could record instances of successful class contributions like this:

Participation in class discussion	Displayed knowledge of contemporary news and current affairs in class	Displayed knowledge of academic literature in class	Collaboration with other group members
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Several useful points of advice for practice were mentioned in the literature. Bean and Peterson (1998, p.38) suggest that:

“[t]o grade class participation fairly, the instructor needs to create an environment that gives all students an opportunity to participate ... so that the most extroverted students don't dominate the discussion while others sit silently”.

They suggest introducing activities such as the use of card-systems for questioning in class. Other formal class activities, e.g. games, small-group work and quizzes, are already used, inconsistently, on the course.

Bean and Peterson (1998, p.33) also emphasise that

“[w]hen students see that their participation is being graded regularly and consistently, they adjust their study habits accordingly to be prepared for active participation”.

Armstrong and Boud's (1983) system suggest not assessing class contribution for the first weeks, to allow for the development of student confidence.

Conclusion

Having examined various systems for assessing students' contribution in class, this study has proposed a strategy for improving current practice on the BA Journalism Course, with a minimal increase in time and resources. If properly applied and executed, reliable and valid assessment of this area could profoundly improve the learning and teaching environment.

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Biographical Note

Richard Evans is a senior lecturer in journalism. He joined London Metropolitan University with more than 25 years' experience as a writer and broadcaster on BBC radio and television. He has presented and reported at home and abroad for BBC Radio One, BBC Radio Five Live, and BBC Radio on news programmes, documentaries, panel shows and phone-ins. He has led BBC coverage of some of the most significant events in modern history. Behind the scenes, he is an accomplished producer, writer and news editor. From reporting on local newspapers and commercial radio to interviewing Prime Ministers, he has extensive experience of print, broadcast and new media and has trained hundreds of BBC journalists. **Email:** r.evans@londonmet.ac.uk

Appendix A

London Metropolitan University BA Journalism Self Assessment of Contribution in Class

Student Name	Student Number
Module Name	Year/Semester

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- **With reference to the schedule overleaf, in 500 words or less, give an account of three or more occasions when you feel you made a successful contribution to class. Include dates and names whenever possible. Reflect on your performance and suggest areas for improvement.**
- **With reference to the schedule overleaf, please grade yourself on ATTENDANCE and FOUR of the remaining FIVE categories on which you want to be assessed**

Attendance	Participation in class discussion	Displayed knowledge of contemporary news and current affairs in class	Displayed knowledge of academic literature in class	Collaboration with other group members	Contribution to class blog/message boards

	Attendance	Participation in class discussion	Displayed knowledge of news and current affairs in class	Displayed knowledge of academic literature in class	Collaboration with other group members	Contribution to class blog/message boards
Grade A Excellent	I attended every workshop session	I made frequent, clear, creative, concise and relevant participation in class discussions	I displayed consistent knowledge and analysis of contemporary news and current affairs in class	I displayed consistent knowledge and analysis of academic literature in class	I worked closely and constructively to help other members of the group with their work.	I made frequent, constructive and relevant contributions to class blogs or message boards
Grade B Very Good	I attended at least eight workshop sessions	I made more than one clear and relevant participation to class discussion	I displayed wide-ranging knowledge of news and current affairs in class.	I displayed wide-ranging knowledge of academic literature in class.	I often worked closely to help many other members of the group with their work.	I made more than one constructive and relevant contribution to class blogs or message boards
Grade C Satisfactory	I attended at least six workshop sessions	I made at least one clear and relevant participation in class discussion	I displayed some knowledge of news stories and current affairs in class	I displayed some knowledge of academic literature in class	I helped other members of the group with their work.	I made at least one constructive and relevant contribution to class blogs or message boards
Grade D Needs More Work	I attended at least four workshop sessions	I participated in class discussion at least once.	I displayed knowledge of a limited range of news stories and current affairs in class	I displayed knowledge of a limited range of academic literature in class	I occasionally tried to help other members of the group with their work.	I made more than one contribution to the class blogs or message boards
Grade E Needs More Work	I attended at least one workshop session.	My participation in class discussion was not particularly relevant.	I displayed superficial and patchy knowledge of news and current affairs in class	I displayed superficial and patchy knowledge of academic literature in class	I tried to help at least one other member of the group with their work.	I made at least one contribution to class blogs or message boards
Grade F Needs Much More Work	I didn't go to any workshop sessions	I did not participate in class discussion	I didn't display any knowledge of news and current affairs in class	I didn't display any knowledge of academic literature in class	I didn't collaborate with other group members	I didn't contribute to class blogs or message boards