Chapter 19: Student Presentations at a Distance

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Summary

Key academic skills are the presentation of research and presenting critical, reflected arguments. For distance education students, the predominant mode of communication is text, and there might be limited opportunities to talk and engage in immediate interactions. While the technology exists to connect students by voice, by video and generally by types of audiovisual media in real time, such sessions are often still tutor driven, and sometimes even restrict students to textual reactions.

At the UCL Institute of Education, several modules run activities that ask distance education students to make individual or group presentations in webinar sessions, aiming to develop their academic skills and to engage them in formats of discussions that are common academic practice. While those activities currently are not assessed summatively beyond a participation requirement, formative group feedback is provided to support the overall development of academic skills.

This case study addresses two types of student presentation activities that are used in three postgraduate modules, along with observations on peer and tutor feedback.

Implementation

Two activity types will be described, with a focus on the feedback aspects. Both activities are run as webinars using the Blackboard Collaborate platform, complemented with two text-based asynchronous forums, one for preparatory discussions and one for post-event discussions. The forums mainly exist as a peer feedback resource, while tutors restrict their responses to clarifications of the presentation process, expectations and practical problems.

Activity type: research presentation

Students are asked to prepare a presentation of their research or a piece of research they find interesting. Presentations are of fixed duration and must be supported by a set of slides. To accommodate the widest range of options, students are given the choice between:

1. A 10-minute live presentation plus 5 minutes for audience questions.
2. A pre-recorded video of 10 minutes, plus either 5 minutes of questions during a webinar session or asynchronous text questions if they cannot make any webinar session.
3. A 6:40 PechaKucha[45] as a webinar presentation or a pre-recorded video plus 8 minutes of questions.
4. A presentation, either face-to-face or video-streamed, during an annual IOE student conference event.

A high number of two-hour webinar slots at a wide variety of times are offered for student booking, with up to six student presentations per session, to allow for slippage and reschedules. The number of webinar sessions overall therefore depends on the number of students. A tutor acts as chair of the proceedings.

Feedback is provided as a group discussion at the end of each session, based on notes taken by the tutor during presentations and organised under main headings. Students are encouraged to be active participants in the feedback discussion, thus providing opportunities for peer feedback and immediate responses to feedback.

Activity type: debate

Students are given a 'house opinion' to debate. They are allocated to two groups by the tutor by random allocation, in order to force some to argue against their instinctive preference, leaving their comfort zone. Groups are then given access to a private discussion forum and a private webinar environment for debate preparation.

The debate itself runs as a live webinar session scheduled for a maximum of two hours to account for slippage and feedback, and it is organised into four rounds with an eight-minute single-presenter slot for each round. Students are free to use visual aids such as slides; they are asked to make their points and engage with the opposing side's arguments. During the live webinar, students are free to communicate in private in the background to adjust their arguments in response to the opposing side's presentation. During a presentation, students are allowed to use the webinar's text chat function in response to the presentation, although the presenter can choose whether to respond to or ignore the text chat.

During the debate, the tutor acts as chair of the proceedings. At the end of the debate webinar, the tutor provides formative feedback and invites students to respond in a discussion.

Votes are held before and after the debate to establish the extent to which the debate has changed opinions; a discussion forum is then provided to pick up on points raised in the debate.

The webinar date and time is agreed by putting a number of different time slots to a vote.

Evaluation

The activities were continuously monitored as part of the normal end-of-module evaluation processes. In addition, anecdotal statements were collected from student forums, and usage statistics and activity engagement data from Moodle and Blackboard were monitored. Anecdotal statements might display a positive bias, as forums appear to be used less for critical responses.

The statistics generally showed a very good level of pre-presentation engagement. Students who contributed less to the pre-presentation forums and also did not take part in webinars tended to participate less in post-presentation forums, highlighting again that the captured statements might be positively biased.

The statements themselves were generally highly positive about both types of activities. Students appreciated the opportunity to listen to each other and debate with each other in real time, even though the number of actual speakers in a session was limited. Engagement by listening and using the text chat, or even simply by listening, enhances the social cohesion significantly and appears to provide an additional level of motivation to students.

Students did, however, comment on a relatively high time investment for both activities. While some concerns echoed a regret that the activity was not part of the overall summative assessment, there was a general consensus that – despite initial doubts by some – both activities were positive learning experiences, and students seemed to be able to identify learning gains very directly. The debate activity showed particularly high engagement rates, with a display of genuine excitement, manifest in frantic background activity, and a high number of unsolicited comments that rated the debate as the highlight of the module.

The high tutor visibility during this activity also appeared to compensate somewhat for a lack of presence during other phases of the module. The group discussion format of the end-of-webinar feedback session was also widely accepted positively, which contrasts with requests for individual feedback for other activities. Tutor feedback is an important part in distance education, and the encouraging comments about live group feedback discussions might be a good complementary method of keeping the provision of formative feedback manageable in terms of workload in groups with a high student-to-tutor ratio.

Benefits and Challenges

Student presentations and live debates offer the potential for high levels of deep student engagement. Tutor feedback can be organised into group feedback discussions, which appear to be accepted positively by, and genuinely useful for, students while not being overbearing for tutors.

Time differences are an obvious challenge for any live interaction in a distance learning context, with students spread all over the world. Tutors should be willing to offer sessions outside of traditional office hours to accommodate as many students as possible. Where this is not possible, for example because only a single session is run as in the case of the debate activity, opportunities for engagement must be created for those students who cannot attend the scheduled sessions. Pre-recording of presentations is one such opportunity, while forums for preparation and debriefing are another.

Supporting pre-recording of videos might be a challenge; a good set of instructions or pointers to self-help resources are beneficial. Occasional difficulties might arise when students have technical difficulties with their microphone during a webinar or difficulties connecting altogether. Not all issues can be resolved on the spot. In the case of individual presentations, the tutor can ask students to prepare presentation notes, which the tutor can read out alongside the slides if there are unforeseen issues with a microphone.

Take-Aways

The activities should be embedded deeply into a module curriculum. While we have been running these activities at Postgraduate (PG) level, they would be suitable for Undergraduate (UG), too, though students might need more guidance.

The activities require some logistical effort on the part of the tutor. The process of finding webinar dates in particular should be initiated as soon as possible, with clear deadlines for session registration. The absolute minimum lead time is two weeks.

Individual student presentations require a high level of tutor availability during presentation week, though this is no different to equivalent face-to-face activities. The debate activity, once times have been agreed, runs pretty much by itself before and after the webinar.

Feedback categories should be worked out well in advance, and tutors must be very familiar with them. There are arguments for and against releasing the categories in advance, so this should be up to the tutor. The webinars themselves require a high level of concentration in order to generate useful feedback points, but providing feedback as a group session opens up highly beneficial opportunities to engage with feedback in more detail.

Time management during webinars must be strict, otherwise slippage will be significant.

Tutors should emphasise character of these activities, as well as the very tangible benefits of working together – in the event of individual presentations, students would still work together on providing peer feedback.