

Using and Supporting New Technology in a Final Year Option

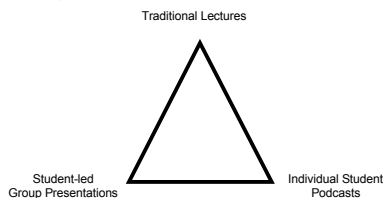
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THE PROBLEM

- Popular options in Level 4 Psychology Honours result in large classes ($n > 70$)
- Less popular options benefit from small classes ($n < 10$) which allows for more student-driven instructional practices (e.g. group discussion, student-led presentations, formative feedback), which are essential if students are to contribute to each other's learning.
- Another advantage of small classes is that more innovative assessment techniques can be employed which get away from the traditional timed examination.
- How can we effectively incorporate both student-driven instructional practices and innovative assessment methods into an advanced course with a larger class size?

THE SOLUTION?

For the new course *Autism Spectrum Disorders* we decided upon a three-pronged strategy:



Traditional Lectures: (First half of each two-hour teaching session)

- These were formatted typically, and concentrated on core topics each week which linked with the student presentations. Lectures were used to present basic material, essential to the course. Slides and references were available online.
- Using the traditional lecture format for some of the teaching time ensured that basic knowledge was common to all students and provided a bedrock for examination. This also allowed for a more familiar pedagogic environment to balance the innovative practices in the second half of the teaching session.

Student Presentations: (Second half of each two-hour teaching session)

- These were given in groups of 4-5. Each randomly allocated group was given a topic and a starting reference in advance around which they planned and delivered their presentation. In most cases this was a 10 minute powerpoint presentation with each student delivering 2 minutes each on their chosen sub-topic, followed by 5 minutes of discussion.
- One of the advantages of this format was that other course deliverers and other expert members of their research teams could contribute to the discussion.
- The course leader took notes during each presentation which provided the basis for formative feedback, delivered by e-mail soon after the teaching session to the group. This feedback concentrated on presentation skills (e.g. audibility and slide design) but also included some comments on the content used (e.g. whether it was interesting, controversial, or incorrect). The quality of the presentations was high and some were outstanding.
- The feedback was particularly appreciated by the students as this gave them a fair idea of the appropriate level of analysis for the course content: something that is otherwise difficult to communicate *en masse*.

Individual Podcasts: (completed just after the end of the course)

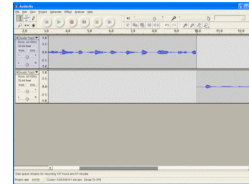
- For the summative assessment students were required to record a 5-10 minute podcast, relevant to the course, which was then submitted electronically.
- The podcast was required to be on the same topic as the group presentation, and students were encouraged simply to expand on the sub-topic that they presented in class, which allowed for the formative feedback to have an impact.
- The justification for the podcast was that it allowed students to demonstrate their extended oral presentation skills individually (impossible with such a large class within available teaching sessions), and also in a format accessible to an external examiner: particularly important for a final-year class.
- Another reason for choosing podcasts as an assessment tool was to add to the students' transferable skills set

PROBLEMS WITH THE SOLUTION

1. **Timing:** The aim was to deliver four group presentations in a one-hour teaching session. Given that the format was allowed to be flexible (e.g. not all students were required to speak, and alternative formats were encouraged), many groups over-ran their slots, or the discussion session developed a will of its own and lasted longer than five minutes. This somewhat disadvantaged the last group in each session because there was no leeway to extend the session's length.
2. **Technology:** Even in the world of "digitally native students" a number of students did not know what a podcast was, or expressed considerable anxiety about using the recording technology.

To deal with this issue a technical support package was developed to provide the students with the necessary knowledge and skills to produce a basic-quality podcast. This package consisted of:

- (a) Online training materials, including detailed instructions on how to download and use software packages (*Audacity*, GUI pictured below) and an example podcast by the course tutor.



Audacity in Action

- (b) Drop-in classes where a member of staff gave a basic demonstration of how to use the software. Also a "panic" class just before the deadline to deal with any last-minute issues.
- (c) A specific e-mail alias was provided so that students could contact a member of staff if they experienced problems with their recording.
- (d) A booth within the department was made available with a high-quality microphone and recording equipment. Microphones were also made available for students to borrow.

EVALUATION

- Although the variation in technical ability of the students was somewhat reflected in the submitted podcast, all students did successfully produce an acceptable recording, despite a few issues with microphone quality and background noise.
- Most students were generally happy with the course. A significant number liked the podcasts and the idea of student presentations during teaching sessions. Some students expressed reservations about the notion of student-led learning, especially when this was given in "lecturer-led" time slots, but their comments were arguably coloured by the procedural difficulties noted above.
- A significant advantage of this approach is that it is possible to share the materials developed by students -- PowerPoint slides, reference lists and podcasts -- with the rest of the class via the department's VLE. The benefits of these learning artifacts for revision are potentially substantial.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

1. Reducing staff support time by producing more targeted materials and using PAL sessions to work on presentation skills and to provide technical support.
2. Tightening up procedures to ensure that presentations do not over-run (this will be helped by the training).
3. Reminding students to listen to their podcasts before submitting them!
4. There is a need to articulate the benefits of student-led learning. Some students still have a very rigidly traditional view of how they can learn or be taught. This is a little disappointing from Level 4 students and needs to be addressed in the previous levels.