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Assessing non-technical employability skills in public relations pedagogy: reflections of an educator and students

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Abstract

Higher education faces the pressure of training students with non-technical employability skills, as well as meeting academic rigour and curriculum outcomes with limited resources. Vocational disciplines such as Public Relations (PR) grapple with the challenge of preparing students for the profession by developing the necessary skills. In an attempt to develop these skills, third-year South African university students were given a class assessment that required reading a number of set readings and working in groups. I present how, in the design of the module assessment, I included, through active pedagogy and participatory learning, the development of non-technical employability skills in PR, in addition to curriculum outcomes. I share an outline of the assessment, as well as the feedback from students from their responses to a questionnaire administered at the end of the semester. I discuss my own reflections on how the use of this assessment targeted curriculum outcomes and multiple non-technical employability skills as required within a third-year PR module. I highlight how this design was achieved without onerously increasing the number of assessments or resources needed. Through this article, I present practical student engagement in the classroom through effective incorporation of a flipped learning approach in an effort to develop non-technical employability skills.

Introduction

The pressure for graduates and students from institutions of higher learning to acquire non-technical employability skills during their undergraduate study is immense. Globally, future employers as well as governments expect institutions of higher learning and educators to contribute positively towards not only the technical skills, but also the softer non-technical employability skills of graduates (Culkin & Mallick 2011). Educators face the challenge of balancing curriculum outcomes to ensure the teaching of both theory-based academic rigour as well as requisite non-technical employability skills. Some of these non-technical employability skills include teamwork, communication, self-management, presentation, confidence and technology skills (Cassidy 2006; Jackson 2014; Husain, Kumar & Saritha 2017). These non-technical employability skills are considered the vehicles by which graduates become employable and demonstrate competence in their places of work (Asonitou 2015). This requires educators to become proactive in developing assessments that drive the agenda of cultivating technical as well as non-technical employability skills amongst students. This is because "the teacher needs to understand public opinion and the social order, as much as the public needs to comprehend the nature of expert educational service" (Dewey 2008:5).

For public relations (PR) students especially, non-technical employability skills play a critical role in ensuring the success and sustainability of this growing communication profession. Meng (2015:31) emphasises that in PR "if we, as educators, can enhance both communication skills and leadership development for public relations majors, our graduates will be able to develop a sustainable competitive advantage and provide long-term value to organizations." The shifts in PR as a vocation demands additional skills, which include individual self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship-building, strategic decision-making based on interpreting information and measuring efforts (Meng 2015). Advances in communication technologies and globalization have influenced these vocational shifts, creating fierce competition in the job market (Akpan 2016), especially in the constrained South African context. It also means that in this context, students need to become active participants in their learning, not simply passive recipients of knowledge and information.

Cassidy (2006) asserts that potential employers of graduates consider it the responsibility of educational institutions to develop employability skills of individuals. The modern employer demands an expanded skill set that includes both technical and non-technical employability skills to propel the systemic innovation required for business competitiveness (Collet, Hine & du Plessis 2015). However, in spite of the recognition of this by multiple stakeholders, according to Jackson (2014), graduates are not meeting industry expectations in certain non-technical employability skills. This shortcoming is due to a number of factors, such as academics being uncomfortable with teaching that goes beyond their discipline-specific experience at a curriculum level (Collet *et al* 2015). This discomfort occurs in spite of the recognition that no conflict exists at all in higher education between developing skills for employment and developing skills for learning (Fallows & Steven 2000). The challenge then, is how, practically, these technical and non-technical employability skills can be developed, without significant additional assessment burdens on both students and their educators.

In this article, I share my experience of designing and using a single semester assessment in an undergraduate third-year PR module to consider assessment-for-skills *and* curriculum outcomes

through the adaptation of the flipped classroom pedagogical model (Vaughan 2014). The flipped classroom model is used in active participatory learning pedagogy (Moran & Young 2014), having enjoyed significant global success. However, flipping the classroom can be a deterrent because of the time required of the educator to design and execute it in a resource constrained higher education context. My main objective with this article is to demonstrate that in a module with large student numbers, a single assessment can be designed to achieve multiple outcomes i.e. curriculum outcomes *and* help towards training students with vocational non-technical employability skills.

In this case study, third-year PR students in an urban South African university were tasked with working in groups of no more than ten students per group, and were instructed to be prepared to present weekly in front of the entire class as a group. The presentation required was a one-slide summary of that week's PR module learning unit readings. The presentations were to be delivered weekly through Google Drive to me. The selection of which groups presented on a weekly basis was random, at my discretion as the educator. At the end of the module, I sent out a feedback survey for the students to complete on the assessment's usefulness. In this article, I thematically analyse and share their responses to the questions. What I found in carrying out this assessment was that students reported that they were far more involved with the module's content, were better prepared for class and benefited on a personal level with respect to their non-technical employability skills. Students self-reported: gaining more confidence, understanding the class content better, using assessment deliverables to prepare for other formative assessments, as well as learning how to work better in teams. My discussion intends to provide some practical insights for vocational educators as to how an assessment can be designed and executed to achieve multiple objectives.

In the paper, I discuss the existing literature on the flipped classroom model as an active learning tool for participatory learning pedagogy and current discussions in research on non-technical employability skills. I also discuss the pressures faced by academics in higher education to teach and assess for both technical and non-technical employability skills. I share my inspiration based on these reflections, to develop an assessment borrowing components of the flipped classroom that could help with multiple areas of skills development (specifically for public relations students based on my industry experience), and then I detail how I went about executing it. Lastly, I share the results from the feedback students provided to me on their experience of the assessment, along with a discussion and some concluding remarks.

Literature review

The flipped classroom is a pedagogical model that reverses lecture and homework elements (Evseeva & Solozhenko 2015; Moffett 2015). The key characteristic of the flipped classroom model is that students spend class time for other purposes other than the delivery of content by the educator with the help of technology (Arnold-Garza 2014; Moffett 2015). Students are encouraged in this pedagogical model to collaborate with one another, thus fostering peer learning through active engagement with the course content (Engin 2014; Moffett 2015). According to Moran and Young (2014:167), in a flipped classroom, "students are engaged with, motivated by, and learn from compelling interactive educational experiences". This means that exercises and activities need to be designed by educators with well thought-out learning outcomes that will compel students to participate actively (Roehl, Reddy & Shannon 2013). It is also valuable for increasing educator–student

interaction time, illuminating for the educator how the students "attempt to analyse and apply new knowledge" (Moffett 2015:331).

"The flipped classroom has two defining components: moving the lecture outside of class, usually delivered through some electronic means, and moving the practical application assignments, formerly homework, into the classroom" (Arnold-Garza 2014:8). Thus, technology is a key component of success for the flipped classroom model, especially outside the classroom (Moffett 2015). Technological innovations enable different techniques for pedagogy (Roehl *et al* 2013), however it does not ensure learning (Engin, 2014), nor does technology replace the need for planning and designing of curriculum outcomes for learners. Educators are still required to undertake "…needs assessments, determining [of] content and learning outcomes, and selecting appropriate educational and assessment methods" (Moffett 2015:332). The flipped classroom is a useful pedagogical tool to innovate models of learning and to prepare students for what they will encounter after they graduate (Vaughan 2014).

According to Arnold-Garza (2014), the flipped classroom pedagogical model achieves the positive outcomes of increased student engagement, improved educator-student relations and active learning without the need for additional resources. In higher education, particularly in South Africa, resource constraints plague many institutions (Slonimsky & Shalem 2006), and thus the use of the flipped classroom model is a useful tool to balance "recognized educational theory and evidence-based techniques" (Moffett 2015:331). There is significant support for the flipped classroom model through evidence of its success in various spheres, supporting Vanderstraeten's (2004) finding that the relationship between home education and classroom education is far more enriching when done together, even with education being an autonomous system in society.

Whilst the benefits are well evidenced throughout the literature, there are challenges with flipping the classroom, particularly the increased amount of time spent in designing the activities and course material, as well as building student motivation to take responsibility (Moffett 2015). Thus, the pressure on educators involves the planning and the execution of the flipped classroom model, balancing course outcomes, as well as motivating students to engage with the assigned activities (Moffett 2015). This is particularly challenging because the flipped classroom model breaks the typical pattern of pedagogy where students are passive participants (Engin 2015), and forces students into (the often unfamiliar position of) being actively engaged in their education (Roehl *et al* 2013; Vaughan 2014; Evseeva & Solozhenko 2015).

Arnold-Garza (2014:12) highlights flipped classroom principles as follows: "a flipped classroom, with emphases on diversity in learners and teachers, use of interactive and progressive activities, use of appropriate technology, connecting skills to real-world needs, and seeing the learner holistically, not just in one learning context". Ultimately, students graduate and enter their chosen industry to work and are expected to demonstrate what they have learned over the three to four years they have spent in higher education. Transition into the world of work is extremely complex for graduates in the context of increasing competition as the number of graduates coming from universities rises (Fallows & Steven 2000). Employers look for skills that go well beyond qualifications and experience (Husain *et al* 2017). Broadly, the skills students learn during their academic career can be placed into two skill categories of technical and non-technical (Cassidy 2006). Employers demand an expanded skills set

from graduates as a requisite for their organisations' business competitiveness (Collet *et al* 2015). For employers, it is simply no longer sufficient for a graduate to only have knowledge of an academic subject (Fallows & Steven 2000). Educators in institutions of higher education need to address public and industry criticisms of their failure to produce graduates ready to tackle real-world problems with adequate quality and career skills (Akpan 2016; Collet *et al* 2015).

The general lack of skills and employability among South Africa's youth (mostly coloured and black youth) is attributed to the perceived poor quality of education in basic education (Spaull 2013:45). This burdens higher education with addressing the inefficiencies of high schools, whilst maintaining high teaching and learning standards at these institutions. Educators in institutions of higher education thus need to accommodate these factors in their pedagogical approaches in delivering curricula by embedding both employability skills and technical skills into their curriculum teaching (Fallows & Steven 2000). This needs to be done without unnecessarily adding modules into the curriculum (Husain *et al* 2017). Moreover, employers consider it to be the responsibility of higher education to do so (Cassidy 2006; Jackson 2014). Developing non-technical employability skills is not only the sole responsibility of the Careers Department, and there is no conflict between developing technical and non-technical employability skills (Fallows & Steven 2000; Husain *et al* 2017).

In an effort to assist by covering content, but building room for more engagement in the classroom, institutions have encouraged educators to use a blended learning approach. "Blended learning has become increasingly popular in higher education globally, forming the cornerstone of curriculum design and providing opportunity for learning not previously possible or available to students" (O'Flaherty & Phillips 2015: 85). Many universities have policies guiding educators on what constitutes blended learning, often as a mixture of class time, online content, mixed media and external guest lecturers. A tool that reflects the growing popularity of blended learning is the rise of the flipped or inverted classroom (Carlisle 2010; O'Flaherty & Phillips 2015).

The flipped classroom is a teaching method that relies on students preparing content outside of the class, often through use of digital technology and the internet (Herreid & Schiller 2013). First popularised in the United States of America (USA), research findings suggest that the flipped classrooms as a teaching method is effective in engaging students to promote learning as it goes beyond traditional teaching methods (O'Flaherty & Phillips 2015). "A central theme in all of this activity is the idea that active learning works best. Telling doesn't work very well. Doing is the secret. Active student engagement is necessary" (Herreid & Schiller 2013: 65).

These activities require a significant amount of planning on the part of the educator to build clear guidelines for students and outline the expectations. The planning requires the educator to allocate resources, embed curriculum outcomes as well as plan for non-technical employability skills outcomes. Planning and sharing what is expected of students upfront, helps manage students' anxieties and reduce their frustrations during their preparation time for flipped class activities (O'Flaherty & Phillips 2015). Preparation and articulation of expectations also highlights the student's individual responsibility to participate and take charge of their own learning outside of the class. "Studies focussing on student perceptions of the flipped class were generally positive with a significant minority having some negative views" (O'Flaherty & Phillips 2015: 94). Among some of the reported advantages of the flipped class method of teaching are the efficient and creative use of classroom

time, as well as increased student engagement evidenced by their increased levels of achievement (Herreid & Schiller 2013: 62). Planning on the part of educators is important because O'Flaherty and Phillips' (2015:89) research indicates that "additional time and technological support is required in relation to development of activities and uploading of student grades, as the introduction of flipped class increased the number and frequency of assessments". This requires preparation by both students and educators throughout the process.

The PR curriculum is ever changing, in line with industry developments due to globalisation, and finding locally relevant texts to prescribe is challenging. This creates additional pressures on educators of having to work through using multiple sources of reading for class content, to infuse the requisite academic knowledge, as well as the employability skills necessary for graduates' non-linear career readiness (Fallows & Steven 2000; Akpan 2016). The public relations profession centres on building and maintaining stakeholder relationships through communication. This involves developing significant soft skills in order to engage with stakeholders (Harrison, Freeman & Cavalcanti Sá de Abreu 2015) in the PR value chain, hand-in-hand with technical skills and knowledge. Table 1 lists these technical and non-technical employability skills required in public relations.

Table 1: Technical and non-technical employability skills for public relations (Doyle 2019).

Technical skills	Non-technical skills
• Communication: written and oral • Developing deliverables based on a brief • Research • Presentation to stakeholders • Writing and content creation • Synthesising of content • Media relations • Analytics • Creativity	• Relationship building • Working towards and adhering to deadlines • Reading critically • Working in teams • Receiving feedback • Conflict resolution with stakeholders • Taking responsibility and accountability • Flexibility

In my self-reflection as an educator and public relations practitioner, I found I needed a different way to engage the students and not simply teach or assess for academic content. I felt that in the past my lecture time had not been used efficiently, that students did not seem to be engaging with content outside the classroom, and that there was little time left for active interpersonal engagement between myself and the students. I also evaluated my past assessments as having been rigid, leaving little room for responding to student needs as the semester progressed. Student engagement is critical for learning in higher education (O'Flaherty & Phillips 2015) as students learn more effectively through participation and the tendency towards parrot learning is reduced. I used this pedagogical approach as a guide and as inspiration for designing a flipped classroom model assessment. Thus I set out to achieve the following goals:

- Student preparation of material before class and reading the material provided beforehand.
- Simulate real scenarios that PR students would encounter in the world of work i.e. technical employability skills development.

- Build up non-technical employability skills for students that they will use throughout their PR profession.

With all this in mind, I embarked on designing a single flipped class assessment experiment to create efficient curriculum outcomes, whilst also ensuring non-technical employability skills were included in the design of the module. The most important aspects for myself as an educator in the development of the flipped class assessment was to limit the number and frequency of assessments (O'Flaherty & Phillips 2015:89), optimising the limited resources available to me, and assessing both technical and non-technical employability skills of students.

Research method

This section discusses the actual design of the single assessment, as well as the collection of student feedback through a questionnaire using open-ended questions, the responses to which were thematically analysed. I first describe in detail the steps taken to design the assessment, including the size of the class and the context. I kept a weekly record in the form of researcher notes detailing my experiences as an educator throughout the administration of the assessment, including the amendments made to the assessment, in response to the classroom reality from week to week. The other data gathering tool used was a Google form questionnaire I asked the students to complete, post their experience of the assessment, which was voluntary and anonymous.

Assessment design methodology

The most critical factor to developing flipped class assessments that require student participation in the classroom is planning (Roehl *et al* 2013). Right at the beginning of the academic year, prior to the start of the university's academic activities for the semester, I engaged in module planning. The PR module I taught is offered over seven weeks, with the number of contact lectures doubled up per week, so planning was critical to make efficient use of this short time. My planning included updating content and selection of readings per learning unit in the module. The module had five learning units, and each had an average of three readings per learning unit. These readings consisted of textbook chapters, academic articles, as well as mainstream articles with relevant content, and were uploaded to BlackBoard (the online Learning Management System used by the university) ahead of the commencement of classes. The planning included mapping out the dates per week, as well as the schedule for signing up for groups. Paper-based sign-up was chosen for this first attempt, to simplify the participation process for students as much as possible. To make full use of the contact sessions, a total of thirty minutes was allocated for student presentations in each classroom contact session. Groups would present on the same topic in a given week. For each week, I worked out a randomised order of group presentations, which I did not share with the students, as the students would be called up during class on an impromptu basis. I had a single tutor to assist in this module as an additional resource, and he was critical to student peer support throughout the semester, as well as an administrative resource for me in keeping track of the student presentations.

In the first class of the module at the beginning of the semester, I shared the expectations and process for the classroom presentation assessment to the 180 registered third-year students. They were instructed to organise themselves into groups of between three (3) and ten (10) members, allowing

them the flexibility to choose who to work with, as well as how to divide the responsibilities. I set up a Google Drive folder for the module, which was used for the weekly submissions, which were to be uploaded by a single group representative by midday on the day before the contact session. The format of the submissions had to be a single slide, summarising the readings for the week. The first contact session for the semester was an introduction, and thus their first presentation submissions were due at the end of the same day, with only one reading allocated for them to summarise. The first submission I used as a trial session to work through the execution of the assessment. Paramount to the use of the Google Drive was honesty and trust, which I discussed during the briefing, as all the students had access to other groups' submissions for the duration of the module.

Marks were deducted for: (1) late submissions after midday, of up to ten percent and (2) incorrect content in the slides, which I evaluated for each submission. Once the groups had uploaded all their presentations each week, ten (10) group presentations per learning unit were selected at random for the groups to present in front of their peers across two lecture sessions.

Group members all received the same mark for the assessment. The assessment marks consisted of marks for submission (40%), and the class presentation (60%). For submission, students were awarded one hundred percent for timely submission for the correct learning unit, with evidence of the content from the readings. Overall, the assessment counted eight percent (8%) towards the students' semester marks because this was a new activity introduced to them. I did not want the outcomes of it to prejudice or negatively influence the students' overall semester results.

Each class had five groups presenting, which added up to ten groups per week, and each group was allocated five minutes to present their summary slide on the topic ,with time set aside for questions and answers from the class as well. Thirty minutes was the lecture time commitment for the exercise. Groups had to be prepared for each class, as they were not made aware in advance which groups would be presenting during which lecture. This also ensured that class attendance was more regular as all group members needed to be present for their group's call-up. There were initially twenty groups in total for this assessment, and thus the total number of presentation opportunities per group was twice over the seven weeks. The marking rubric (see Appendix 1 - Rubric) for the assessment was shared with the students during the introduction session, as part of the expectation-setting conversation. I assigned the marking of presentations to the tutor, making it a peer-to-peer assessment.

Educator notes

During the students' presentations, I took notes on some subject-matter inconsistencies as well as my observations about the assessment. These notes helped me better understand which learning unit areas to emphasise, which to address more directly and which to elaborate in more detail as I prepared the content for lectures. I also kept a document of student issues dealt with weekly throughout the module after each presentation session.

I reviewed the group presentations uploaded to the Google Drive each week to assess the content, and the digital folder was useful for time stamps of the submissions by the designated group members. The drive allowed easy downloading of the presentations, as I merged all five presentations into a

single file, and all the groups used my university laptop to present. The tutor marked the students' presentations as they presented their work using the presentation rubric, which I captured on a separate mark sheet weekly.

Group work and the coordination of many members can be challenging, most especially for students that have differing levels of passion and commitment to the module. I put a conflict resolution process in place for the groups, in order to ensure individual as well as collective responsibility for the group's success in the assessment. If one or more group members were absent on presentation day, after the class the group had to discuss with me how they wanted to deal with their absent group members. The options available to them were limited to the following:

1) The absent group members receive the same mark as those present.
2) The absent group members receive a lower mark to those that were present; the deduction was at the discretion of the educator.
3) The absent group members receive zero for the presentation.

This decision-making process empowered the group members to hold each other accountable with consequences for non-performance. The groups had to send an email to me copying all group members by the end of their presentation day, stating their unanimous decision, which ensured there was a record of their decision. The email had to include all group member details and shared with all of them for transparency.

At the end of the final presentations after the seven weeks, I sought to find out how students had experienced the assessment and whether I should continue to administer it in future modules. I compiled a Google form questionnaire to get student feedback about the specific assessment and their experience of it. The questionnaire had four main sections: (1) student demographics; (2) perceptions of group dynamics; (3) perceived usefulness of the assessment; and (4) future repetition of the assessment.

Analysis of questionnaire data

The questionnaire on the class presentation assessment had a response rate of twenty-five percent (25%), after three weeks, with forty-two students completing the questionnaire online. The questionnaire mainly included open-ended questions for students to complete by sharing their personal experiences of the assessment. The student responses to the open-ended questions were thematically analysed, the goal being to understand the common experiences as well as the divergent student views of the assessment.

Coding and thematic analysis of the students' responses was done manually. Manual coding was critical to the process, as the context needed to be preserved in order to apply human interpretation (Saldaña 2015) of the experiences contained in the student responses beyond similarity of words used. Newer codes were added where text did not fit, or leaned towards other codes with respect to student experiences. These codes were refined, until each response per question was evaluated to be appropriately allocated to a code. The codes were initially named using phrases from student responses to denote the umbrella idea or pattern constructed from the data. Once the first order

codes were completed, I then moved on to thematising the codes per questionnaire section. Each valid student's response was included in the thematic analysis of each section of the questionnaire.

Findings

This section includes discussion of findings from the individual educator's perspective, as well as findings from the students' feedback from the questionnaire. I discuss the practical implications of administering the assessment over the allotted time, and what I found during my experience. I then present the findings from the students' responses, including a thematic analysis of their feedback in the open-ended questions.

Educator findings

I kept a document of weekly reflections about the assessment, including insights based on my experience of the assessment throughout the seven weeks. I had not originally factored the briefing session into the planning, and thus had to amend all the presentation dates to make allowance for it. This meant that at least once a week, group presentations on learning units and those to be covered by me were out of sync, proving confusing for all involved.

The paper signup sheet was not a useful tool, since the sheet was drawn up prior to the final student numbers being confirmed, and there were more open spaces on the sheet than necessary. The manual sign-up process also created difficulty with individuals removing and adding names to groups. This made it clear to me that in future the sign-up process needs to be online. An online system where students could check their groups I believe may prove better for future use.

The weekly submissions and checking of the presentations required a significant amount of my time because it was the first time I had administered this type of assessment. This checking process was critical and proved beneficial as one group that had repeat students had simply replicated my past lecture notes, for which they were allocated a zero mark. It was also a challenge to update submission marks, as the groups' single slide submission did not include group members' names and student numbers. In the next class I amended the submission criteria, requesting that a cover slide with the group members details be included, which eased this challenge slightly. There were however still some groups that had captured incorrect student numbers or spelled group member names incorrectly and these issues surfaced during the finalisation of the assessment marks at the end of the quarter, with individual members in the same group having different marks for the assessment. A number of groups also had membership changes, as the registration numbers changed for the module, with groups reshuffling and taking on other members or losing some members during the term. This exacerbated the mark allocation challenge as, from week to week, some individuals were in different groups.

The presentation uploads to Google Drive worked well as students had prior experience with Google Drive, each group assigning one of their group members to upload weekly. Using Google Drive enabled me to check the submission time, without relying on my email inbox and reducing the possibility of losing the presentation submission on my computer. One group, for two consecutive weeks, uploaded a PDF file, which made it challenging to integrate their presentation into the other four for class

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presentations. The groups were reminded to check that their submitted presentations were either in PowerPoint or Google slides format.

Student feedback

Three students' responses were excluded, as they had referred to a different assessment. Most of the respondents were between the ages of 21 and 23 years old, and nearly 65% of the respondents were female. The students set the tone for each lecture, because while they were nervous to present, an atmosphere of empathy and respect prevailed for those standing in front of their peers. This attentive listening is evident in some of the responses to the questionnaire where a student said that one thing that did not work well for the assessment was "the presenting part because somewhere we were listening to wrong information" (sic). It demonstrated that students had engaged with the content and could tell where their classmates were not correct. These presentation slides also served as content summaries for the module exam, and were included in the module's exam scope, as students had access to all the other groups' slides.

I moderated the first presentations' marks as the tutor had marked the first five groups strictly. The moderation was necessary as the first five groups of students had less than 24 hours to get into groups, read, submit and prepare for their presentation. Questionnaire responses to what the students believed did not work well for the assessment centred on time available to complete the assessment, as well as group dynamics. Students stated the following did not work for the assessment with respect to time:

- "The little time we had to finish the assessment."
- "The time frame to work on summarizing the readings and the numbers of members in each group."
- "The time allocated for task completion."
- "The time frame for submission."
- "The time was so little."
- "The time given to complete the task."
- "We didn't have much time to prepare as it was due every week and sometimes we had other assessments to work on."

While there were a number of students who complained about time, one said that the actual challenge for them was "time management" and group "members being lazy". Most students felt that the large numbers in their groups were a challenge – although they could be in groups of *up to* ten people, with no mandate for them to reach this threshold. Students could self-select, and move groups, but had to participate weekly, building some flexibility for them to work with people of a similar level of commitment. Unfortunately, the class size and limited time did not allow for flexibility on numbers for smaller groups. This form of assessment also helped students learn how to: (1) manage difficult team dynamics, (2) meet their deadlines and (3) take advantage of group member numbers to divide the work. From the questionnaire responses, Figure 1 shows that most of the groups had between seven and ten members, which may be why they experienced these challenges. However, group size was not the only factor for group dynamics issues, as even those in smaller groups reported carrying group members and experienced challenges "meeting up, group members had a lot of excuses". Nearly two thirds of group members contributed weekly (Figure 2), and this was consistent with self-reported individual weekly contributions, as shown in Figure 3.

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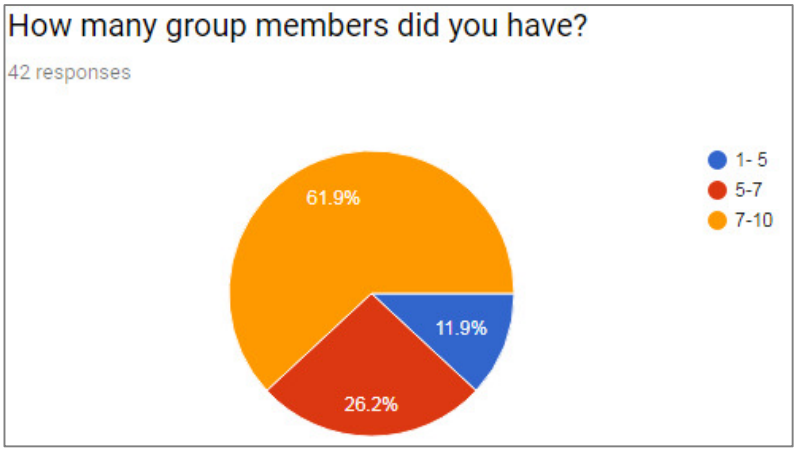

Figure 1: Group size (source: author).

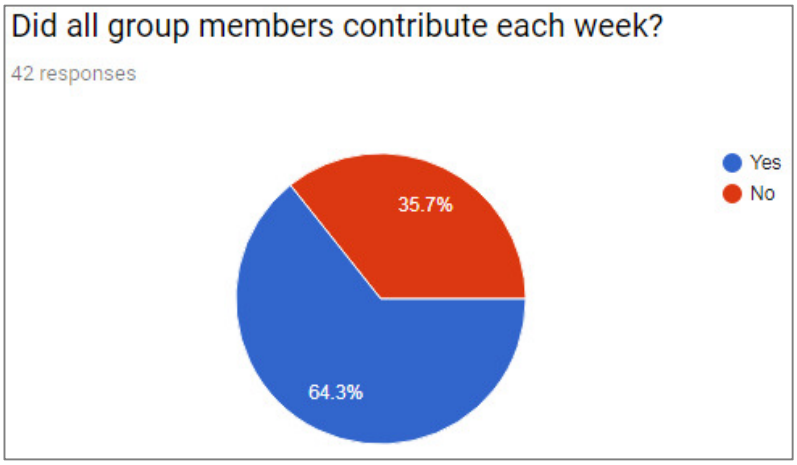

Figure 2: Weekly contribution of group members (source: author).

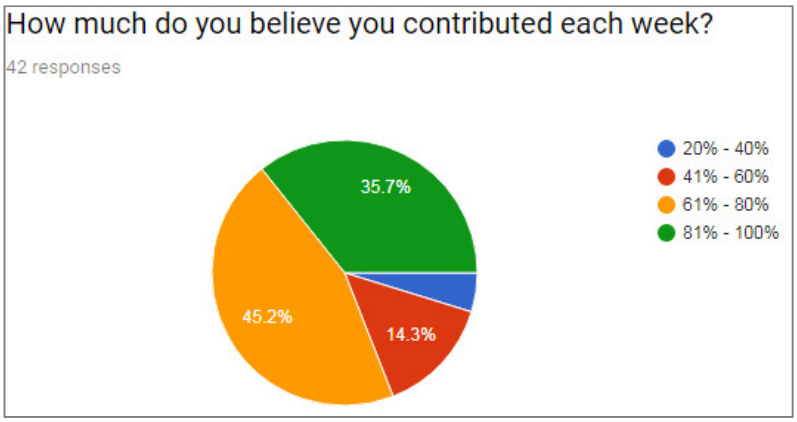

Figure 3: Self-reported individual weekly contribution (source: author).

Some students did not enjoy the random selection of groups to present and felt this was the one aspect of the assessment had not worked well. Their suggestions of how this could be improved in future included that I should:

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- "Provide the list of the people who are going to present before the presentation. That gives them time to prepare."
- "Maybe alerting the students who will present tomorrow."
- "Don't choose groups randomly."

The group dynamics challenges extended to their presentations in class. Class attendance was not an objective for this exercise, however, absenteeism resulted in one student from a group presenting alone to avoid receiving a zero mark for the presentation. The rest of this individual's group members received zero for the presentation on that day, and this was an executive decision taken by me in order to protect the group member from retaliation by the group members. In instances where group members were absent, those given the same mark were those that had made prior arrangements with their group and warned them of their absence.

There were a number of advantages of this assessment. They reported having gained experience with team dynamics and other non-technical skills, as well gaining academically regarding the module curriculum. In responding to what they learned about themselves, a number of students reported that they had gained the *confidence* to present in front of large groups of people. Students wrote:

- "That I am capable of overcoming my worst fear which is presenting."
- "I am able to speak in front of people, regardless if there is less or more group members presenting."
- "I learnt that I am capable and relevant."
- "That if I actually prepare beforehand I am way more confident to speak in front others."
- "I've learned that with rehearsals I can handle the public stares."
- "That I have good speaking skills good but still has room for improvement."

In addition to this personal confidence boost, they learned to work with new and different people, and were better prepared to engage with the lecture content. One student reported "it was useful because if it was not for class presentation I would bother myself to read the readings, and it's better than class quiz". This response affirms one of the main motivations for the design of the assessment, to address both curriculum and non-technical employability skills for students. Some respondents affirmed this in stating:

- "In a way [it was useful], as it gave insight of the topic before it was lectured to us."
- "It kept me busy and made us know what the next class will be about."

When asked if they found the assessment useful, one student enthusiastically responded "Yes! Yes! Some topics I didn't need to study for [be]cause I had already knew most of the things". Another student said, "It was [useful]. Every presentation I learned something new. Helped towards understanding what could be expected of me in tests and assignments". Confidence with presentations emerged as a recurring theme in their responses regarding the usefulness of the assessment. A number of respondents also reinforced the benefit of teamwork. Only a minority of the students that responded (5%) did not believe the assessment was useful to them.

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The response to whether the assessment should be undertaken with other students in the future was affirmative, with 73.8% of the respondents saying that it should be undertaken with other students in future (see Figure 4).

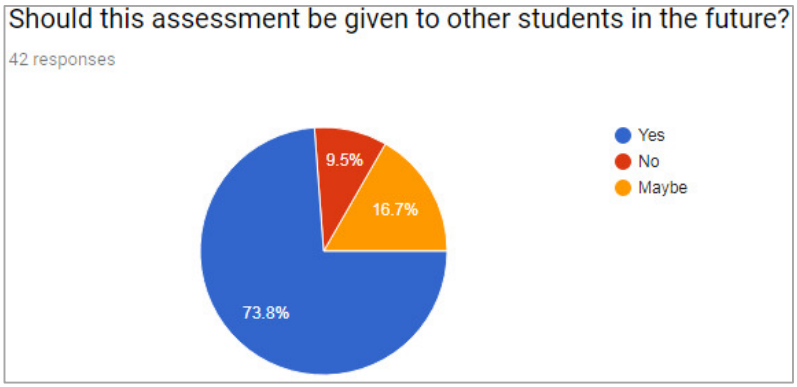

Figure 4: Responses to future use of assessment for students (source: author).

The students were also asked how they believed the assessment could be improved in future. Whilst I experienced personal lessons of my own from the challenges experienced, it was important to get students' perspectives on my design of the assessment. A number of the responses pertained to group size, and making group membership mandatory, not voluntary. One student recommended that I should "Put them into groups. The students should not choose for themselves as there is less productivity". Other students wanted the assessment to be more closely linked to other individual assessments like tests and exams. The issue of preparation time came up again, including suggestions that I provide a group presentation schedule. Some comments on time were:

- "Give them more time to finish the assessment."
- "Give more time to people to do [the] summary."
- "Give us enough time to prepare."
- "Give more time for the students to go through all readings and not just scan through them."

The time comments are endemic to the number of modules students have on their timetables and the pressure of the seven-week 'semester' timeframe. However, I do not believe the expectations were too onerous given many students were able to organise themselves well. The suggestion of smaller group numbers is a good one, although it depends on the total class size, as each individual needs to have the opportunity to participate, and the seven-week 'semester' timeframe limits flexibility of group sizes. An excellent suggestion to improve the assessment was to allow "students [to]…add audio visuals examples to their slides", which certainly may strengthen their presentations.

The impromptu nature of the presentation schedule has benefited the class through preparation, engagement and participation in class. This is in spite of the suggestion by one of the students that I should "Provide the list of the people who are going to present before the presentation. That gives them time to prepare". Prospective employers from an advisory board with whom this assessment design was shared afterwards emphasised their support for the element of surprise, adding that it was good practice for students. The advisory board members emphasised presentation as a critical PR skill that students, as future employees, needed; as they would be called on to present to clients without

the benefit of prior preparation or a speaking schedule. This advisory board feedback affirmed for me that the impromptu selection of groups was critical to the development of their presentation skills.

One student felt that I should "teach first". This however would not allow me to identify knowledge gaps in the students' understanding of the learning unit content and readings, in order for me to reinforce and fill in those gaps during my lecturing. This would have also resulted in students becoming passive recipients, while pedagogical research reports that students learn best through active engagement. Teaching first would have placed the majority of the onus of preparation for class on me the educator and students would simply be passive recipients, losing the advantages of the flipped class approach.

A critical suggestion, which I had also observed, was that of mandating full group member participation in the actual presentation in class. A student pointed out in their response that the assessment could be improved by my action to:

> Encourage students to take part to present even if not on the same day, because some of group members they did not present at all they were just accompanying other to front to present, which might shows that maybe there unfamiliar with the content.

This would mean in future that each member of the group would have to contribute, and not simply be present. Few groups had these 'silent' group members during their presentations, but the assessment guidelines had not been emphatic on each group member's role during the presentation. Mandating each group member to speak in future may also help address issues of group member participation and build stronger individual commitment to the assessment.

Conclusion

Flipped classroom assessments need not be onerous and educators should not use such assessments simply for the sake of keeping students busy or covering content. The assessment I designed, borrowing a flipped class approach, worked well to achieve a number of goals and contributed towards developing curriculum and non-technical employability skills for PR students. Students prepared module readings for classes, summarised large amounts of information, developed group dynamics skills and reported gaining confidence with presentation. Students reported that their presentation skills improved, and the assessment outputs provided useful study material for their module exam preparation. The assessment design proved valuable to me too, as I was then able to focus on not only preparing based on curriculum outcomes, but also practically engaging with the module content to address the students' knowledge gaps which I had identified in their presentations.

The planning of such a multi-use single assessment requires time and needs careful consideration of logistics. The benefits of participatory learning – borrowing a flipped class model – for students and educators far outweigh any of the challenges experienced. There is room for improvement in my assessment design to build in more flexibility, and the recommendations by students will prove helpful for future undertakings of this type of assessment in order to simultaneously achieve curriculum outcomes and contribute to the development of non-technical employability skills.

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Appendix 1: Rubric

Scoring Rubric for Oral Presentations

PRESENCE -body language & eye contact -contact with the public -poise -physical organisation	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**0**
LANGUAGE SKILLS -correct usage -appropriate vocabulary and grammar -understandable (rhythm, intonation, accent) -spoken loud enough to hear easily	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**0**
ORGANIZATION -clear objectives -logical structure -signposting	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**0**
MASTERY OF THE SUBJECT -pertinence -depth of commentary -spoken, not read -able to answer questions	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**0**
VISUAL AIDS -transparencies, slides -handouts -audio, video, etc.	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**0**
OVERALL IMPRESSION -very interesting / very boring -pleasant / unpleasant to listen to -very good / poor communication	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**0**
	TOTAL SCORE_____ / 30					