

10. ASSESSING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF AN UNDERGRADUATE SELLING AND SALES MANAGEMENT MODULE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore a framework to assist in the assessment of presentation exercises, and to facilitate reflective learning. It aims to provide an assessment tool that can be altered to suit numerous contexts and disciplines. The use of presentations is commonplace in the pedagogy of business courses in particular marketing/sales based curricula. Effective oral communication skills are central in modern business. Through the incorporation of sales presentations into the pedagogy of a marketing curriculum, these vital skills can be enhanced. Crucially however, they must be used so that reflective learning can occur, otherwise students will fail to hone and develop these skills further.

The staging of oral communication presentations in a curriculum, facilitates in students' skill development, greater knowledge competency and audience learning. Indeed presentations are regarded as the most important topic covered in a sales- related academic curriculum by both professors and sales representatives (Parker et al., 1996). Experiential learning is a powerful pedagogy for teaching marketing by internalising theory through guided practice (Young, 2002). Through project based learning (e.g. role plays and mock sales presentations) students can learn through the consequences of their own actions and modify their behaviour in future similar situations. However, due to large class sizes, time and resource pressures, providing detailed feedback can be extremely problematic for lecturers.

The assessment instrument outlined in this chapter is used in a selling and sales management module on the University of Limerick business degree programme. This module tries to develop students' selling skills, increasing their understanding of typical activities, opportunities, challenges, and career patterns facing professional salespeople. Learning is a cumulative experience, thereby necessitating multiple teaching delivery formats, and assessment instruments. Encouraging student engagement in the subject material is vital. Students really benefit from project-based learning, going back to the oft-used proverb –

*Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember.
Involve me, and I will understand.*

Learning is facilitated through interesting lectures, relevant case studies, workshop discussions, tutorial exercises, videos, guest lectures from industry practitioners, presentations, coaching and innovative assignments. One must also adopt appropriate assessment methods. When developing assessment methods a number of key questions have to be addressed. These include:

- Does the assessment align with the learning outcome?
- Is the assessment fair?
- Is it of high academic standard?

- Does it cover the subject area comprehensively?
- Is it designed in such a way that the student can complete it and that it can be marked in a reasonable time?
- Does it engage the students' interest?

A variety of assessment methods such as project work, presentations, short exam questions, and essay questions are utilised. Figure 1 outlines the assessment instruments utilised in the module.

Figure 1: Assessment Instruments used in the Selling & Sales Management Module

Exam (55%)

25 Short Questions – Assesses the entire “breadth” of the course.

2 Essay Questions – Assesses the “depth” of student learning on core issues.

Project (20%)

Design a sales letter and brochure for a randomly allocated business scenario (e.g. selling advertising packages of a business magazine etc.). Projects allow students to apply the theory that is being taught in lectures and tutorials to real life scenarios. Scenarios are chosen so that potential problems such as plagiarism or the use of personal contacts are negated. Also these scenarios are chosen to challenge students, giving them real world constraints, while simultaneously engaging their interest in the subject. Groups of two are used because students learn from each other. Group project work boosts team working skills. Furthermore it acts as a support mechanism, where they motivate each other. A well-designed group project work boosts students' critical thinking, develops their research, problem solving and interpersonal skills, helping in their own personal development.

Presentation (25%)

Students have to deliver a 15-minute sales presentation for the randomly allocated business scenario to a prospective client (*i.e. the lecturer*). Sales skills have to be practiced and applied. Students benefit from conducting a realistic sales presentation, acquiring practical skills, relevant to real world marketplace. The presentation in particular helps develop confidence, proficiency and habit. It provides students an opportunity to demonstrate specific selling skills (e.g. closing a deal, dealing with possible objections or negotiating).

The primary focus of this chapter is the elaboration of a presentation assessment template that assists educators assessing presentations, and allows students to experience reflective learning. A central tenet in reflective learning is the provision of feedback by providing comments on an assignment (Young, 2002). Students need to reflect on their experiences during an assessment exercise to truly learn from the experience. One of the key aims of any sales-based curriculum is to demonstrate the skills necessary to conduct a sales call (such as; needs discovery, finding a customer solution, presentation of solution to gain commitment, and closing the sale) (Michaels and Marshall, 2002). Educators use a variety of pedagogical practices to achieve these learning outcomes.

Assessing students against these learning outcomes is problematic. In the modern sales environment, prospecting performance, sales call performance, closing performance and sales presentation performance can all influence the level of sales achieved (Szymanski, 1988). The quality of sales presentation performance is seen as a key determinant of salesperson's performance. Thus, improving the sales presentation performance of our students is a primary goal in any sales-based curriculum. Sales presentation quality refers to the skill with which a person actually delivers a verbal sales message (Sparks and Areni, 2002). The content and style

of the sales message provided acts as an indicator of the overall effectiveness of the sales presentation (i.e. the persuasiveness of their argument). Oral presentation skills are vital, particularly in a personal selling context. As educators we assess our students' oral presentation skills on a frequent basis. Yet only a relatively small number of research studies on the area of establishing best practices in assessing oral business presentations, have been carried out (Campbell et al., 2001).

DEVELOPING THE ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK INSTRUMENT

A standardised student assessment feedback form was developed for the use in presentation assignments. These feedback forms have two main elements. Firstly a table indicating the type of grade the assignment is worth, summarising its key points. Secondly, it includes a section that critiques the presentation in greater detail, outlining core aspects of the presentation performance (see figure 2). Students receive detailed feedback on their strengths and weakness of their projects and presentation, from this presentation form. This is a very useful feedback mechanism so that they can understand their weaknesses and improve upon them. It is important to note that this form is not a student assessment form for the module, nor a questionnaire on learning outcomes. These forms are designed to facilitate a better learning experience for students, rather than a simple numerical score, grade or a one liner comment. The provision of a single score or grade does not provide any value to the student as to how they could improve their future oral presentation performances.

Providing value rich, detailed feedback to students on their sales presentation performance was the core objective in the design of this assessment instrument, rather than the development of a sophisticated scaling device that would not allow for adequate student reflection on their performance. Detailed analytical comments help students improve the quality of their future presentation delivery.

In giving feedback to students on their sales presentation performance, a number of qualitative and or quantitative approaches could be applied in this context. A qualitative approach with an open-ended comments section on the quality of the presentation could be used. However this approach is extremely time consuming for the lecturer, and does not allow for a systematic deconstruction of the presentation. Large variances as to the scope and quality of the feedback due to the structural difficulties and time pressures may emerge. A more quantitative approach may also be applied using a variety of scales (e.g. extent of knowledge shown rated on a scale of one to seven). Indeed scaling could prove useful when an individual is being assessed on numerous occasions, and improvements or otherwise can be noted against past performances (i.e. to evaluate has there been any changes in past behaviour). However the use of standardised scales is very difficult to operationalise in this context, due to the variety and dynamism of sales presentations.

The effectiveness of a communication interaction is dependent on a multiple combination of four central elements: content, code, rules and style (Williams et al., 1990). These central tenets are extremely relevant, particularly during a sales interaction. Content focuses on the subject matter of the presentation. The content element of the presentation includes aspects that need to be assessed such as knowledge shown, logical appeal, fielding of objections, questions posed, improvisation shown, and conclusion. Code focuses upon verbal expressions (e.g. grammar, language & pronunciation) and nonverbal expressions (e.g. body movements). The variations in voice characteristics have been shown to influence selling effectiveness (Peterson et al., 1995). The code element is assessed through examining presentation attributes such as clarity, body language and the level of eye contact. Rules focuses upon the communications structure, in other words, rules govern when and how to speak in certain given contexts and situations (e.g. a

professional meeting versus an informal dialogue). Salespeople must adhere to the constraints and boundaries placed on them by prospective buyers. Failure to comply may antagonise and jeopardise the perceived quality of the presentation. The rules element focuses upon attributes such as attention, organisation, audiovisuals, humour, and delivery time. Lastly, style refers to when individuals chose a particular pattern of communication. The style of the presentation is dealt with under the headings of enthusiasm, personal appeal, and emotional appeal. Using these four central tenets, a framework for assessing sales presentation performance was derived.

These categorisations of the sales presentation performance provide a holistic assessment of the quality of the sales presentation performance. An array of presentation descriptors was created under each of the sub-headings outlined above. This approach rather than the use of standardised scales allowed for the articulation of complex constructs. The use of these four central elements allows for a detailed systematic deconstruction of students' sales presentation performance, and can be used in various project-based assessments. All of these factors contribute to the quality of the sales presentation performance to varying degrees. Under each of these sub headings a battery of qualitative statements were created, in an effort to provide a detailed feedback mechanism to students, and to capture the essence and the quality of the sales presentation performance. (See figure 2). The following assessment instrument is used in the assessment of the students' sales presentation performance.

Table 1 – Sales Presentation Feedback Form

Student Name(s): _____ Sales Scenario: _____
 Score _____ Grade: _____

A Grade	B Grade	C Grade	D Grade	F Grade
Excellent & Creative presentation. Excellent Delivery. Excellent Use of Visual Aids. Handled objections extremely well. Very logical structure. Grabs audiences' attention and incite action from a prospective buyer Innovative in every aspect.	Thoroughly Prepared Presentation. Good Delivery. Good Use of Visual Aids. Handled objections sufficiently. Good assignment, however minor flaws present Mostly clear and logical. Grabs audiences' attention, yet fails to incite action from a prospective buyer.	A Competent Presentation. Sufficient enough to warrant a pass. Adequate Delivery. Poor Use of Visual Aids. Failed to anticipate possible objections. A canned presentation. Presentation lacked adequate planning. Not well structured	Poor Presentation. Very Poor Delivery. Failed to anticipate possible objections. Very Poor Visual Aids. Presentation lacked any planning. Lacks any creativity. Fails to grab audiences' attention. Fails to highlight any of product's/service's USP. Poorly structured, Very difficult to follow.	Hopeless, Seriously Flawed, Showed neither thought, effort nor ability

Characteristics of Sales Presentation Role-play

Content	Knowledge Shown: Missing Poor Average Good Excellent
	Logical Appeal: Very Poor Arguments Weak Arguments Too Few Good arguments Excellent arguments
	Fielding of Objections: Unprepared Rejects Questions Too abrupt Vague Not handled well Rambling, Effective
	Questions Posed: Missing Inappropriate Appropriate Excessive
	Improvisation Shown: Missing Poor Average Good Excellent
	Conclusion: Missing Ineffective Too brief Too long Strong Memorable Motivating Effective
Code	Clarity: Confusing Vague Rambling Clear organisation Improved Buyer's Understanding
	Level of Eye Contact: Missing Poor Appropriate Excessive
	Body Language: Missing Distracting Engaging
Rules	Attention: Not attention getting Inappropriate Appropriate Commanded my attention
	Organisation: Missing Unclear Rambling Clear Effective
	Audiovisuals: Ineffective Too many Poorly designed Too few Effective
	Humour: Inappropriate Excessive Ineffective Effective
	Delivery time: Too long Too short On time
Style	Enthusiasm: Missing Apathetic Weak Strong Exciting Contagious Overbearing
	Personal Appeal: Nervous Evasive Authoritarian Defensive Confused Amiable Trustworthy Confident Positive
	Emotional Appeal: Inappropriate Un-motivating Insincere Sincere Dynamic Appropriate Believable Natural Persuasive

(Other Relevant Comments are Written on Reverse Side)

After a student performs the assessment, the lecturer can simply mark out the presentation descriptor statements. Furthermore, this instrument can be used for a peer review of the presentation. The presentation can be conducted within a tutorial type situation whereby other students can watch and assess the presentation performance of other students, or even the lecturer. The student peer review system has two central benefits in facilitating the learning experience. Firstly, the participants in the presentation can gain increased feedback from fellow students, in their assessment of the student's presentation performance (i.e. how they perceived the performance). It must be noted that this feedback must be moderated by the instructor, to ensure that the forms are free from any disparaging remarks.

Secondly, non-participant students who are watching the presentation gain a greater understanding of the dynamics of a sales presentation. Indeed the audience learning as suggested by Martin (1990) can be facilitated through this instrument. Through watching other sales presentations they can identify strengths and weaknesses in the quality of other students' presentation performances, and then apply this learning in their own future presentations, improving the quality of their own performances. Involving students through innovative pedagogical approaches improves their overall learning experience. Using a sales presentation assessment instrument allows students to deconstruct the components of a sales presentation. Through this systematic deconstruction of a sales presentation, students gain a greater understanding of the dynamic two-way symmetrical communication between a prospective buyer and seller during a typical sales interaction.

These assessment forms are filled out immediately after the role-play by the observer or lecturer. A fluorescent marker is used to highlight the various comments on the assessment instrument. Also additional comments by the examiner can be placed on the back of the form if required. This format facilitates ease of correction for the lecturer, and operates as a standardised marking template for each assignment, which promotes consistency in correction. In addition it eliminates the need for extensive noting taking and time consuming, detailed hand written critiques on behalf of the lecturer.

In an effort to capture the true benefits of reflective learning, the presentations can be captured on video, so that they can be analysed through playback of key events within the interaction (e.g. handling of objections) or the presentation in its entirety. Even if the instructor cannot review the presentation again with the students due to time pressures, the students themselves should playback the recording to get a true comprehension of their sales presentation performance. The two main benefits of video playback are feedback and self assessment, and it thus acts as a valuable learning experience (Lamb and Baker, 1993). Calcich and Weilbaker (1992) advocate that having two class sales presentations boosts sales presentation performance rather than just a single sales presentation. This gives students an opportunity to apply their skills again based on reflection of their past performance. Students should be exposed to at least two presentation assessments, so that students can learn and reflect on their past performance. Learning is a cumulative experience, the students' reflection on their past performance helps improve future presentation performances.

Implications

As academics, we strive to make sure that our assessment tools are both fair and relevant to the task at hand. This student presentation feedback assessment instrument acts as a strong debriefing instructional technique, where detailed feedback can be articulated, facilitating ease of correction and standardising the assessment, making it both fair and equitable. Students are praised for positive aspects of their presentation reinforcing this positive behaviour whilst at the same time instructors/peers highlight aspects of the presentation that warrant further attention or elimination from future performances. This assessment instrument increases self-awareness in terms of students' own abilities and weaknesses.

A holistic approach in the assessment of a student's presentation performance is required. Through reflection on actions during an assessment exercise it can help in the modification process that will ultimately improve future sales presentation performances. It must be noted that during these types of assessments, multiple feedback information can be derived through self-critique, peer critique, and lecturer critique. Campbell et al. (2001) noted that peer and self-assessment provides much needed supplemental instruction to students. If students receive a simple single score or grade it does not

enhance future performance. Sales training seeks students to understand the importance of a desired skill, become aware of the skill set required, be able to demonstrate the skill set effectively and finally be able to apply their newly acquired skill set as a habit, developing proficiency in the area.

This type of presentation assessment instrument could also be used in different contexts other than personal selling. This framework could be deployed in the assessment of other curricula. For example, the presentation of student projects, debates, and case study analysis could be evaluated using this framework. Other types of pedagogical exercises could simply adapt this framework to the particular assessment needs of a specific assessment. If students are presenting, their communication interaction can still be assessed through the four central elements of content, code, rules and style. Similar adapted feedback forms can be created for other curricula, aligned with the learning outcomes of the particular course. The identification and development of teaching methods dedicated to improving interpersonal communication is an important area of research (Calcich and Weilbaker, 1992). For such an important and frequently used pedagogic exercise, the use of presentations needs further research, in terms of improving operational efficiencies in their usage and improving the learning outcomes for students utilising these assessments.

CONCLUSION

Presentations are a proven assessment device, yet they are resource intensive in terms of time and equipment. The framework suggested should help in formalising the correction of these assessments. It provides a holistic approach to assessing a student's performance based on the content and the delivery of their presentation. Furthermore this framework improves the operational efficiency and effectiveness of conducting presentations for assessment and learning purposes. In order for project-based exercises like presentations, to be truly effective, educators need to ensure that reflective learning is facilitated, and that students can truly learn from the process. The framework outlined in this chapter allows students to systematically deconstruct their sales presentation performance and this framework can be used in a variety of curricula.

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