Peer Assessment of Oral Communication/Presentation Skills

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Background and rationale
This was introduced into a final year pharmacology program with 50-90 students per year. The learning objectives were to improve and to practice oral presentations. These are important for pharmacology students who, early in their careers, may have to give formal presentations at learned society meetings and at team research meetings in industry. Equally, for students taking careers outside pharmacology there is evidence that many employers value oral presentation skills.

The task for the students was to make an oral presentation on an agreed topic under the rules for oral presentations at British Pharmacological Society meetings. Previous practice was for a minimum of 4 academic staff to assess each of these presentations (10 minutes + 5 minutes for questions) which involved a significant workload (12-15 staff/days). The students had prepared shorter oral presentations previously in the course but neither staff nor students were provided with explicit marking criteria on which the presentations would be judged. All students were required to be present at all presentations but, while attentive to the presentations of their friends, often paid little attention to the presentations of others. In addition, there was no explicit use of the learning opportunity made available by recognition of the good and bad practice seen in the various presentations and no attempt was made to develop assessment skills.

How to do it
Since each presentation was on a different topic assessment of content was not required and assessment is not based on knowledge but on presentation skills. This is amenable to peer assessment. However, rather than impose a set marking schedule determined by academic staff it is better to develop, for each group of students, a marking schedule which is evolved by the class.

This has a number of advantages:
- The class feels ownership of the marking schedule and believes it is appropriate;
- Discussion during the development of the marking schedule helps clarify the meaning of the terms and criteria and the standards which should be adopted;
- The students are aware before making their presentations as to the criteria on which they will be assessed.

To do this I gather the students together in a lecture theatre a few weeks before the students start preparing their presentations. I tell the students that we are going to develop the criteria on which their presentations will be assessed. I draw from the students what they consider to make a good talk. If they are not immediately forthcoming it is easy to give a two minute good presentation (e.g. any part of one of your own lectures!) and a 2 minute bad presentation (too fast, no visual aids, inaudible, no eye contact, monotone etc.). Take ideas for assessment criteria from the class and then group the ideas together under headings (see 10 below). Usually you can draw all the important points from the students but if anything is missing ask 'what about……..?'. Disaggregate big categories like 'clear visual aids' - what do they mean by that? This usually takes about 40 minutes or so in total. Then having developed some main headings get the student to agree which are the more important and to assign 100 points between the different headings. If there is no general agreement, take a vote and go with the majority. This gives slightly different marking schedule each year but I do not regard this as important. Reproduce the developed marking schedule and distribute to the class. Get them to peer mark their colleague's presentations on the appropriate day.
Collect the marking sheets and calculate the average marks awarded for each category of assessment and an average total mark for each student. Provide each student with details of the scores they achieved and also the class average in each category so they can see how their marks relate to the class average.

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Advice on using this approach
 If there are many students this might mean they each have to sit through 60 or more presentations (too many). Having done this as a member of staff it is an amazingly boring and exhausting process. Divide them into smaller groups so each student listens to and assesses 8-10 presentations. Postgraduate demonstrators can attend and assess (in addition to the students). Appoint one student (presenting in the second part of the session) to chair the first part (keep to time, introduce each speaker, select questions) and then swap to a different student for the second part of the session. Use a separate marking sheet for each group of presentations and collect them in at the end of each presentation session. Student loose them or fail to bring them to following sessions given half an opportunity.

It is possible to appoint 2 or 3 questioners for each presentation (but there is a tendency for questioners to fix the questions with the presenters prior to the session).

It is possible to have a verbal debriefing of good/bad practice at the end of each session though students can give feedback inappropriately (or not at all) which can present problems.

Does it work?
It is impossible to say if the quality of the presentations was improved as too many variables were changing at the same time. It certainly saved staff time. The students were very appreciative of the clarity of the assessment criteria and being involved in their development.

Further development
Currently looking at ways to provide more detailed feedback on what could be improved and how this could be done.

11. References
I E Hughes & B J Large. Assessment of students' oral communication skills by staff and peer groups. New Academic, 2, 10-12 (1993)
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