A student organised conference – using self and peer assessment to moderate individual and group marks

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Background
As a major part of a Level 3 module students are required to organise a one day Parasitology Conference. The marks associated with the conference contribute 50% of the module total. The other 50% are represented by continuous assessment (oral presentation, impromptu oral talk, computer-aided assessment) and a written exam.

Each student belongs to a group of 3-4 students and prepares an oral talk for the conference. In addition, as a class they need to organise a conference committee (i.e., elect a president, vice-president, treasure, secretary etc) and agree on the conference format, find sponsors, and, most importantly, attract two guest speakers.

On the Conference evaluation form (Appendix 1) members of the audience (relatives, guest speakers, academics) are asked to return a mark for the conference organisation between 1 and 100. They are also asked to give a separate mark (between 1 and 100) for each student group presentation.

Much of the work preparing for the conference was not included in the timetable of the module but was independently organised by the students. Therefore, it was decided to use peer and self assessment to moderate the audience's marking.

'How to do it'
The week following the conference the students moderate the marks as part of a debriefing session (Appendix 2). Students have to mark themselves for the group presentation and the conference organisation. They are also asked to assess the talks within their presentation group and the contributions of individuals (whole class) to the conference organisation. The students do not know what marks other individuals have awarded them.

Troubleshooting
You need to be aware that student groups behave differently – some require more academic presence, others do not. There's a balance to be struck between giving the students the freedom to collectively make their own decisions and keeping an eye on the feasibility (and legality) of what they intend to do. It is perhaps worth securing some extra funding just in case the students cannot find

sponsors and a bit of discrete cross checking with catering, press office etc can ease a module manager's fears!

The conference participants come from a range of backgrounds, some scientific, others non-scientific. Naturally these return a wide range of marks. Also relatives of the students are prone to be over-generous and do not always strictly follow the University marking guidelines. The occasional extreme mark is dilute by marks from the other conference delegates and further moderated by the student de-briefing session. However you do need to be ready to face challenges to the marking by the students.

Does it work?

Yes. The students go through different phases: suspicion at the start of the module, stress in the middle when time is ticking and nothing is confirmed, tension a few days prior to the conference followed by relief and satisfaction when the conference is run and everything went well. The majority of students recognise that organising and running a conference is hard work but they consider it a worthwhile exercise to develop their employability-related skills.

Initially the conference was tried with a class of 26 students. For the oral presentations 16 of the students returned an average mark while seven upgraded themselves, two downgraded themselves and one did not return a mark. For the conference organisation 17 students returned an average mark, while eight upgraded themselves and one did not return a mark. Significantly, 23 of the students failed three of their colleagues yet when these students evaluated themselves they returned average (or even top!) marks. At least one of the three failed students subsequently admitted that she had not worked enough.

A final third level of mark modification is applied by the module leader if targets (i.e minimum of 50 conference participants and £200 sponsorship), previously agreed with the students, were reached. Penalties will be given if targets are not reached or if technical/behaviour problems are encountered during the conference. Typing mistakes in leaflets, conference programmes or web-pages created by the students are also penalised (-1 point) for the conference organisation mark so all the students share the blame, unless the problem is specific to one particular student group presentation.

If students cannot reach a consensus about the marking or if any of them appeal then a meeting will be called to get a consensual decision. However, since the introduction of the new module format (3 years) this has not happened.

Appendix 1

Student Parasitology Conference

April 28th 2004 Ridley Building room 1.65

UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

Evaluation form

1. Conference organisation

1.1.   Have you been satisfied with the conference organised by our students
       (Yes / No)

1.2.   How would you rate the conference organisation:

Very good   Good   Fair   Poor   Fail

1.3.   Please could you return a mark for the conference organisation
       between 1 and 100 (First class between 70 and 100; 2:1 mark
       between 60 and 69; 2:2 mark between 50 and 59; 3rd mark
       between 40 and 49 Fail: below 40):

2. Scientific presentation

2.1.   Have you been satisfied with the student scientific presentations:

Yes / No

2.2.   How would you rate the student scientific presentations:

Very good   Fair   Poor   Fail

2.3.   Please could you give an individual mark (between 1 and 100 again) for
       each group presentation:

Student Group 1 (Malaria)   :

Student Group 2 (African sleeping sickness)   :

Student Group 3 (Redworm in horses)   :
Any other comments?:

Thank you for your help, we hope you enjoyed the conference and we hope to
see you next year

Please leave your feedback form in the boxes provided in the lecture theatre.

Appendix 2

Parasitology Conference

Debriefing Questionnaire:

Student Name:

1) How would you rate the conference impact (1:very poor to 5: Very important)

-for team working
-for scientific issues
-for meeting external professionals
-for boosting your confidence to speak in public
-for valorising your CV

2) What did you enjoy the most during this conference exercise?

3) What did you enjoy the least during this conference exercise?

4) If we run this event again next year:

-What would be the best month to do it (from January to July)?

-How long should the conference last?

-Should we have students presenting either posters or oral presentations?

-Should we have students presenting individual talks or group talks?

5) What future actions should be organised to secure more sponsorship next year

6) What future actions should be organised to get a larger audience?

7) Would you recommend to involve Press and other Media next year?

8) For the conference organisation

-According to you what percentage of student did overworked/worked/underworked?

-What was the easiest job within the conference organisation?

-What was the most difficult job within the conference organisation?

9) Would you do it again next year if you could (Y/N)?

10) What would you like to keep for the format next year?

11) What would you like to remove for the format next year?

12) Would you like to see more/less involvement from the module leader?

13) Would you like to see more/less involvement from other academics if yes which ones?

14) Would you like to see more/less involvement from other University staff members (if Yes, which ones)?

15) Any other comments?

16) Please could you evaluate the work performance for each individual in your presentation group only.

Group 1

Name	-50	-20	-15	-10	-8	-5	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+5	+8	+10	+15	+20	+50	Other (justify)
Ryan C.																				
Sohail K.																				
Jonathan D.																				
Jonathan C.																				

Group 2

Name	-50	-20	-15	-10	-8	-5	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+5	+8	+10	+15	+20	+50	Other (justify)
Bruce H.																				
Karen C.																				
Matthew D.																				
James M.																				

Group 3

Name	-50	-20	-15	-10	-8	-5	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+5	+8	+10	+15	+20	+50	Other (justify)
Anna D.																				
Angela P.																				
Rebecca J.																				
Chris C.																				

Group 4

Name	-50	-20	-15	-10	-8	-5	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+5	+8	+10	+15	+20	+50	Other (justify)
Anna C.																				
Louise B.																				
Iona C.																				
Clare F.																				

17) For the conference organisation please could you evaluate each individual in your class.

Names	-50	-20	-15	-10	-8	-5	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+5	+8	+10	+15	+20	+50	Other (justify)
Ryan C.																				
Sohail K.																				
Jonathan D.																				
Jonathan C.																				
Bruce H.																				
Karen C.																				
Matthew D.																				
James M.																				
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