

PRESENTATIONS: WHAT'S STOPPING FE STUDENTS FROM ENGAGING WITH THEM?

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Abstract

With this research, it was important that a way of controlling behaviour in class was found that could be used in future years. The research focussed on developing new methods of teaching presentation skills and measuring the change in behaviour during class. Five new methods were developed to teach the skills needed by the students and behaviour was monitored using a form to track improvements on a weekly basis. Observations and interviews were used to gauge student feedback.

The research found that most of the students were open to doing presentations but, the changes did not suit the group as a whole. It also showed that keeping the students busy in class has a positive effect on behaviour. The student approach to the presentations was professional, but affected by peer pressure. This showed itself in the lack of original approaches displayed in the presentations. Finally, the students are likely to keep producing unoriginal presentations until the peer pressure can be overcome.

Five conclusions were identified from the results of research and these fed into ways of improving the authors practice. It was concluded that using a buddy system to support students would be useful, while engaging students in the design of their course would also reap benefits. Further conclusions were made with regards to overlooking possible trends in the research and understanding the journey that the students will be taken on. The last conclusion focussed on the tutor's role in the classroom and the fact that they are there to protect their students from bad behaviour in the classroom.

Introduction

This report outlines an Action Research project, which was carried out in the author's classroom and looked at why students were worried about presenting information to their classmates and its effect on behaviour during their lessons.

In order to address this issue, it was decided that looking at teaching methods would be useful to see if there was something amiss in the lessons. It was felt that the previous approach had covered the presentation skills subject matter in a broad enough manner, but that it lacked depth. It was also considered that there was the possibility that the students had already done presentations before and they were familiar with structures, finding content and carrying out the presentations.

Therefore, the adjustment to the teaching of presentation skills consisted of developing five distinct and separate actions that would cover the subject matter in a more in-depth manner. Each action would be carried out during class times and give the student an opportunity to study how the action works and to consider how it might be used in their presentation. They were also allowed time to create their PowerPoint slides.

During each action, the In-class assistant would help record how the students behaved using a specifically designed form. This form aimed to chart the behaviour levels over the course of the actions and would show whether behaviour levels were improving or not.

Actions

The actions used were all undertaken in class, to ensure that I could collect all of the results and analyse the outcomes in person. The adjustment was to change the way Presentation skills were taught to students and to see if teaching them in more detail would affect their behaviour during lessons. Five actions were used.

Action #1- Rules for the audience

This action involved a group session around the interactive whiteboard, where all members of the class suggested the rules for the coming presentations. If the rules were set by the group, Silberman (1996) says that it should be easier to get the group to follow them.

Action #2 - Handout

A hand out entitled “What makes a good presentation?” was downloaded from the Gnosis learning website (2008) which gave the students an outline of what a presentation was and how it should be conducted.

Action #3 - Youtube video

Students should see how other IT professionals carried out their presentations and a video was shown that had been uploaded to YouTube. It featured a description of how Steve Jobs from Apple Inc carried out his presentations.

Action #4 - Class discussion

A class discussion was held with the students to see what they thought presentations were and to draw out the advantages and disadvantages of doing a presentation. It was an interesting exercise and Race (2007) also considers small group working to be invaluable to a student.

Action #5 - Detailed explanation

The majority of the students were familiar with the assignment brief, but it was felt that a detailed explanation would help the students to understand what was required. O'Donovan, Price & Rust (2004) suggest that, despite this approach being fraught with difficulties, it is in the interest of all parties to have a full understanding of what is required in the assessment.

Evaluation Methodology

A range of methods were used to look at and gather data on the five actions. The evaluation was designed to find out what prevented the students from engaging with presentations and to see if the actions had any subsequent effect on their attitude towards them.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are a cheap and easy method of gaining a persons point of view on a subject. When designing a questionnaire, Preece et al (1998) says you can use open questions to get opinions or allow the respondent to expand on an issue. Closed questions allow the designer of the questionnaire to get specific answers to specific questions and the use of Likert scales gives a measurable method of quantifying a

persons feeling on a subject. Questionnaires have several drawbacks, with the main one being that they are particularly difficult to design for the range of respondents that are likely to be encountered in the target audience. Wording should be as clear as possible and language tailored with the target audience in mind. Another problem with questionnaires is that respondents may not fill them in or return them.

The questionnaire was paper based and used to get the students views on presentations. It asked how much they enjoyed doing presentations (or not) and whether they enjoyed working with other people. From this, it could be determined how to design a new teaching strategy. Dawson (2009) has stated that a mixture of open and closed questions would work best and that leading questions should be avoided. In short, give considerable thought to the design of the questionnaire to ensure you get accurate views from the students on presentations.

Student Behaviour Form

A Student Behaviour Form was required to record the behaviour of students during specific classes. This would help to see any trends that might take place throughout the research period. A form was specially designed for the project and a copy was given out to some of the projects' key people to give feedback. This feedback was incorporated into the design of the sheet and it was used when the actions were delivered in class.

The advantage of the form was that it was easy to design and construct. It used a grid system that allowed the In Class assistant to choose the level of behaviour for each student and quickly record that level. The drawback with this form was that it didn't allow the In Class assistant to record when that behaviour took place during the lesson.

The Student Behaviour Form needed testing before it could be used. A pilot run of the form was needed in a lesson to see how it performed. Further modifications were incorporated into the form as a result of the pilot run.

Observation

Observations have three main types – participant, structured and unobtrusive observation. Robson (2002) describes participant observation as a qualitative

method, while structured observation is quantitative and unobtrusive observation is an informal method. The advantage of using observation was to gain direct feedback on how comfortable the students were in doing the presentations and I could gauge how much preparation had gone into their slides. The main disadvantage with observations is that the people being observed may act differently than normal circumstances, an effect known as the Hawthorne effect. McNeil and Chapman (2009) also state that the participant nature of observation might also skew the results because of the inadvertent effect of the observer i.e. How am I affecting the presentations by being in the room?

Interviews

Interviews are an extremely useful method of gathering a person's thoughts and ideas surrounding a subject or event. They are reasonably easy to design and set up and don't require too many resources. It is useful to record the interview using an MP3 player with record facility. Closed questions should be used first, and then open questions can be employed to tease out any issues. The students were interviewed to see what their reaction was to the modifications and to gauge whether they felt more confident about doing presentations. For example, the students were asked whether they were happy with the way their presentation had gone and what would they like to do to improve their presentations. We discussed the actions used to present the task and asked whether they had gained anything useful from them.

A semi-structured approach was used in the interviews, as it allowed me to talk about specific points, but remain flexible enough to include any issues that might have arisen during the discussion (Denscombe, 2007). The interviews were also being done on a one to one basis, which has several benefits. For example, Bell (2005) states that recording each interview individually makes it easier to transcribe because there is only one voice to listen to. One to one interviews were also easier to manage, as the students did not always turn up to class together.

Results

Questionnaire summary

Section 1 showed that there was a variety of attitudes amongst students towards group activities, while Section 2 showed that most students enjoy doing

presentations. Section 3 showed that students were happy to work in pairs or on their own when preparing for presentations, whilst section 4 showed a number of points. Those points were that all students would prepare their slides by using the internet and use presentation software to show their findings. They would also present their findings individually.

The questionnaire demonstrates that the students were open to doing group work and presentations and that they knew how they were likely to complete any future presentations. It also shows that it is not always possible to develop changes that will suit everybody. The students are individuals and the results of the questionnaire only reflect a portion of the group. As a result, the final strategy may not have suited some in the group.

Student Behaviour Form summary

The Student Behaviour Forms show that there is a link between the actions and the move from inappropriate behaviour to acceptable behaviour by the students during specified periods of time in class.

There is a suggested link between each action and the improvement of the behaviour, which centres on the fact that each action aims to engage the students. With a fixed outcome to each action, the students are less likely to display inappropriate behaviour and concentrate on the task in hand. It is felt that the first action set the agenda for the required behaviour and further actions built on the behaviour that was displayed in the previous action. Thus, it was a cumulative effect over the whole modification of teaching methods.

The crux of the project is demonstrated in this section of the project i.e. better teaching gets better behaviour.

Observation

The observations of the presentations showed that the students had taken them seriously, but had not attempted to do anything original. Their presentations were informed, their approach was mostly professional, but they stayed in their comfort zones by following a tried and tested format.

The observations show that there is another force at work in the students, i.e. peer pressure. It is a subtle force, but one that is not manipulated by any of the students to gain control. Rather, it is a perceived pressure that may be self-induced by each student on themselves. Minton (2005) concludes that this pressure is imperative with regards to what people are prepared (or not prepared) to do to complete a task.

This was evident in two instances. The first instance was those students that are considered to be confident or motivated. They seemed unwilling to try anything new, despite the changes informing them that options were available. The second instance was those students who did not turn up on the day to do their presentation. They were insistent that they would not take part in the presentations and had to make alternative arrangements in order that they could pass the assessment. These two instances demonstrate the power of peer pressure in the students and offer an insight into why most of the students stuck to the tried and tested presentation method.

Interviews

Question 1 shows that the students have to be made to focus on a subject before you can start asking them to remember specific facts about it. Question 2 shows that the students did not consider the classes we did as part of their preparation for the presentations. Question 3 shows that the students are still hesitant about presentations, while Question 4 shows that they needed reminding about some of the actions we did in class. Question 5 shows that the students were not excited about the presentations and Question 6 shows that the students are thinking about what they have done in their presentation and how they might improve them in the future. However, they still think of presentations in the same way as they always have. Question 7 shows that the students had noticed that behaviour had improved during their presentation.

The interview shows that the students still have the same attitudes towards presentations, despite having better tools to carry them out. We can see that students could make a better attempt at creating the presentation, but this would be hampered by their reluctance to carry out the presentation. Until they get over this issue, the effort they put into creating the presentation is lost because they will always design a presentation that is "safe".

Conclusions

It was known before the project began that there was likely to be a wide reaction to the idea of presentations and this was borne out by the results of section 1 of the questionnaire. Motivation played a key part here and it was felt that the more enthusiastic students would bring the less driven students along with them. Section 2 of the questionnaire suggests that more of the students were positive towards presentations, so it was feasible that the enthusiasm would spread amongst the students.

Conclusion 1: Motivated students might influence other students to complete an activity

Section 3 of the questionnaire shows that a presentation was a flexible idea that suited the students, as presentations are usually done by one or two people and this number of presenters appealed to the students. The data that was collected was extremely helpful in designing an adjustment that suited both the students and the project.

Conclusion 2: Getting student input into how an activity might suit them gives an indication of how to design that activity

As we see in the results of the observations, lack of confidence has an enormous effect on how willing students are likely to be when they perceive themselves to be the centre of attention. There was no prior warning of how much this would affect the outcome of the project. What I understand now, is that this lack of confidence has seriously undermined the research methods. At the time, the modifications were designed towards informing the students on how they could incorporate some suggested ideas for improving their ability to do a presentation. However, it does not matter about the quality of these suggested ideas because they were never going to take them on board if they thought it would make them stand out from the crowd.

Conclusion 3: Investigate any themes that occur in a project more thoroughly

With regard to the changes, this has been successful in answering the questions asked regarding why the students behave the way they do. What the modifications show is that the busier you keep your students, the easier it is to keep control of your

classroom. The modifications demonstrate that having a detailed strategy in place for teaching a subject is important. The research has shown that what is done in class affects the students and, if you don't work to the best of your abilities, this can have unfortunate consequences for the students.

The modifications have had an impact on the students, in that they are more informed about what constitutes a good presentation and how to create one.

Conclusion 4: Understand the journey you are taking your students on

Some students are still likely to misbehave, regardless of what is done during lessons. It is important that strategies are in place to allow you to deal with this behaviour, should they occur. It is evident that poor behaviour affects all of the students and a teacher needs to take control of the classroom, and the behaviour that occurs in it, to protect themselves and the students.

Conclusion 5: I am there to protect my students

Changing practice

Looking at the conclusions have been drawn, we should consider the following changes to the author's practice. When we look at Conclusion 1, it occurs that pairing students up, also known as a buddy system, could be an effective method of promoting advances in less able students. Older students could be allowed to choose their partners when doing tasks, if they were mature enough to do this sensibly. However, there may be benefits in matching high achievers with less motivated students. Ginnis (2008) suggests that matching students effectively not only aids learning but cuts across barriers between students. This strategy could be employed where a student's learning would improve through working with more able students.

As we progress to the beginning of a new academic year, thoughts are drawn towards accepting a new batch of students. Induction week is particularly suited towards changing practice, in light of conclusion 2. Traditionally, the induction week has been about getting to know the students and them getting to know each other. Some tasks could be added to the induction week that gains some insight into what material they feel should be covered during the next year and how they would like to

engage with it. Petty (2009) talks about students being self-directed and teachers should only be there to help them choose how to learn about a subject. If students feel they have had a say in what they are learning, it may also help with student retention and success rates

Conclusion 3 suggests that a theme has been overlooked in the project. There is a certain detachment that new teachers are advised to have, says Walklin (2002), when dealing with students in the 16 – 19 year old range. This distancing creates a division between the tutor and his students and I sometimes find it difficult to accept that any shortfall in their role as a student is any responsibility of mine. This can lead to problems in rectifying the situation or building a trusting relationship. I will endeavour to build better relationships with my students to allow me to become more sensitive to their needs. This can be done through the tutorial sessions that I hold with my students on a monthly basis.

Personal Reflection

Work and life balance has always been important to me and I feel that Teaching can be a career that takes over your life, if you let it. As such, I may have been defensive about how much of my life I give over to teaching. Maybe I have been too defensive, which could be one of the reasons why I don't understand what goes on in my classroom as much as I'd like and what I need to do to correct it. I would like to plan the activities for my subject in a more detailed manner. I do not feel that my schemes of work or lesson plans need to change much, but if I had a clearer idea of how each activity will work, I think this will add to my understanding of what happens in the classroom.

Certain incidents have made me see that I make myself vulnerable in the classroom to poor behaviour, which reflects badly on the quality of my teaching and on my professionalism. I need to change this in order to protect myself and my students and would like to adopt the behaviour policy as set out by the college. The policy enables me, as a teacher, to ensure that a safe environment is available for all of my students and I want to make sure that I use it effectively. I have been approached by a senior manager and she has informed that, should I need any help with the implementation of the policy, she will advise and support me. I feel that this approach will help me to address conclusion 5.

I feel that the changes in my practice will benefit not only me, but my students and, to a lesser extent, the college. The students will gain a more committed teacher, who will put their well being and learning at the centre of everything he does in the classroom and receive better teaching as a result. This might benefit the college too, as another benefit might be seen in the success rates and retention statistics. My colleagues may also benefit from having a more committed teacher amongst their ranks and it could reassure new staff that there are people who they can turn to for advice and guidance.

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