Using Google Custom Searches in Your Course

Using information technology has become an important skill for students and employees. The Internet contains a wealth of valuable information and a lot of junk! As an instructor wishing to use the Internet as a resource your options are typically to either provide students with specific links or have them "Google" to find information on the Internet. Using Google can yield interesting and unexpected results. Creating a list of specific links is time consuming and does not teach the students how to search the web and evaluate information. Often links to specific pages become broken because the site has been rearranged. A Google Custom Search is a valuable aid for instructor wishing to use Internet resources in their course.

Google Custom Search is a feature that allows you to set up a custom search of one or more web sites (or parts of web sites). These "Custom Searches" can be added to a web site such as your personal site or learning management system course page, or simply placed on a local page (a HTML file on a local computer). As an instructor you may customize the search to show your own logo, link back to a page of your choosing, and omit advertising.

Users of the Custom Search have the benefits and learning experience of using a search engine yet you determine the sites that will be searched. You can also add refinements that allow the user to further limit or filter their results by simply clicking on a link that you create. Best of all the product is free and very easy to set up using web based forms. After the search is set up, Google provides all the code to insert the search into your own web page. Simply cut and paste the code into your web page. The sites to be searched can be modified at anytime without having to alter the code in your web page.

See: http://www.google.com/coop/cse/ to create your own custom search.

Some ideas to try: Develop a reference for sheep by including web sites for breed associations, university/extension sites, trade magazines, and maybe some vendors of products relating to sheep. For commodity reports include web sites for California Department of Food and Agriculture (or your state/province) and National Agricultural Statistics Service, etc. Set up state secondary curriculum sites as a resource for lesson plans. Create a custom journal search of multiple online journals. Create a search of some specific sites with conflicting views so the students learn to evaluate content in a controlled environment.

When using this tool you should remember that the Custom Search is just a filter for web pages that Google has already searched. Pages that have recently changed, been moved, or have not been indexed will not be found. Custom Search also works as a site search tool if you have your own web site that you want indexed. Examples of custom searches can be found at: http://www.agedweb.org/search.htm

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Oral Examinations as an Evaluation and Learning Technique for Agribusiness Students

Abstract

An oral examination was given to final year undergraduate Agribusiness students at Massey University in New Zealand and to a class of Masters of Business Administration students at Western Illinois University in the United States. While the purpose of the assessments was to test student knowledge of course material, a very important secondary goal was to improve the students' extemporaneous oral communication skills, particularly those for whom English is not their first language. The students indicated a preference for the oral examinations over written examinations. They also indicated they were much more nervous than anticipated. The oral examinations successfully met the expectations of the examiners. The examiners indicated that more training in extemporaneous oral communication would benefit the students.

Introduction

In recognition of the importance of communication, some Universities require all students to take at least one course in communications. At Western Illinois University, all students take classes, under the general heading of communication skills, in both writing and public speaking. At other universities, such as Massey University, the course may be

only written communication, or only oral communication, or a combination. Some Universities may also require that final year students, perhaps working as a member of a team, to present research findings, orally and written, on an assigned topic.

In today's agribusiness customer driven environment, there is greater emphasis on oral communication skills than on written skills. Further, the most commonly used oral communication skills are not prepared presentation skills, but personal extemporaneous communication, often over breakfast or at a meeting on the farm. In these circumstances, oral communication is required to respond to customer questions, to defend a company position or to negotiate a significant business issue. These situations require mastery of subject material, but also require the ability to clearly, and orally, communicate a business message to achieve specific goals.

The experience of the authors is that oral communication skills important to agribusiness students extend beyond formal classroom presentations to situations that are less structured and potentially more stressful than written classroom examinations or formal presentations. The first 'real life' situation faced by graduating students in which oral communication skills are important often is when they interview prospective employers for a job. In everyday business situations, it is vital to be able to clearly and logically discuss problems in order to successfully achieve certain goals.

Problem

The researchers saw the problem as how to improve the personal oral communication skills of students. The authors used an oral examination in an attempt to solve this problem. The goals of the oral examination were to:

1. Assess student comprehension of course material;

2. Enhance student understanding of the importance of describing a business situation in a clear and logical sequence;

3. Provide the students with some experience in how to use oral communications to improve their ability to accomplish certain goals;

4. Provide an opportunity for students to learn how to quickly, and in a structured manner, react to unexpected questions;

5. Create an atmosphere in which students could respond to questions in a challenging environment.

The authors believe an oral examination provides an opportunity for students to understand how to correlate questions with a logical answer, how to structure a response, how to behave during questioning and discussions and how to explain their position clearly, logically and persuasively.

Methods

Using experience from their own undergraduate education, the authors conducted oral final examinations for 19 students in a final year agribusiness paper. The procedure followed was:

1. Students were given a choice of taking only the oral examination, a written examination or both, applying the highest score toward their final grade.

2. Approximately two weeks prior to the assessment, the students were given 70 questions on important topics covered in lectures, readings and assignments.

3. Three questions from the list of 70 questions were randomly selected by the examiners and written on a 'ticket'. A fourth question, based on problems worked by students during the semester, was also included on the ticket.

4. Before the oral examination, students randomly selected a ticket and were given one hour to prepare responses to the questions and to solve the problem. No reference material was permitted.

5. When the student was ready, the oral examination began. The examination was conducted with only the student and two examiners in attendance. Each student was given approximately 15 minutes to answer their questions and to solve their problem. The students were informed they could answer the questions in any sequence they chose, they could use the white board if appropriate and would be graded on the correctness of their answers, their ability to communicate the answers and on their general mastery of the topic. A correct answer included not only the factual response to the question, but a structured response in which the student provided basic definitions, defined the question, gave a decision / conclusion and supported the result.

6. The students were expected to define words, explain the problem, discuss their solution and defend their answer. The examiners could ask additional questions during the student's explanation to assess the depth of knowledge of the student in the subject.

7. After the students finished their answers to all questions, the examiners immediately discussed with the student the strong points of the answers, the weak points and suggestions for improvements. The students were then given a grade for their performance. The final assessment was based on how the students answered all of the questions, but the problem solved was marked twice as high as the more general questions.

For the MBA students, the evaluation process was 30 minutes long and the students were not provided questions ahead of time. They were required to discuss, negotiate and defend, if needed, an export contract they had written as part of the class assessment. Unlike the undergraduate oral examination, only one examiner participated.

Results and Discussion

1. While all of the students took the oral examination, 90% of the undergraduate students took only the oral examination rather than the oral and written assessment.

2. Of those who took the oral examination, only two (10%), chose to take the written examination in addition to their oral examination.

3. The students said the oral examination was more complicated, and they were more nervous, than they expected. Despite the fact they knew the questions before hand, were examined by only two people with whom they had close contact all semester, were examined in a positive and supportive environment, the students were surprised about their level of nervousness.

4. The immediate feedback from the examiners about the quality of their answers - the strong points and the weak points - was well received by the students and appeared to enhance their knowledge of, and confidence in, the material and their ability to communicate their knowledge of that material.

5. The students indicated that immediate feedback about their ability to communicate also was beneficial as they recognized how they might have improved their ability to communicate as well as understanding areas in which they communicated well.

6. Most students agreed with their grades. As noted above, only 10% of those examined chose to take the written examination in expectation of a higher grade.

7. Unlike the undergraduate students, all nine of the MBA students were required to take the oral examination. They did not have a written examination.

8. Of the nine MBA students, one spoke French and five spoke Spanish as their first language. As with the undergraduate students, they all indicated they were more nervous than they had anticipated. They said they preferred the oral examination rather than a written examination. The six students for whom English was not their first language all expressed a strong preference to the oral examination over the written examination.

9. For the examiners, in both situations, the oral examination permits a more comprehensive assessment of student ability than a written examination in that the examiners may immediately ask additional questions, or request clarification about answers.

Summary

For the 19 undergraduate students orally examined, total required time was approximately six hours. For larger classes, additional examiners might be appropriate. Approximately five hours were required to examine the nine MBA students. Since each MBA student was examined for 30 minutes, instructors may wish to balance the time required for evaluation with the examination time available.

The researchers assert that students would benefit from instruction provided ahead of the oral examination about the best approach to use when providing an answer, how to deal with stress and what to do when problems arise, such as the inability to answer a question. For written examinations, even if they students do not know the answer, a response is possible. With oral examinations, lack of subject knowledge is readily apparent. Examiners may then use additional questions to determine if students were not well prepared or simply did not know the answer to a particular question. The success of the students in the examination depended on their ability to orally communicate not only answers, but to discuss their point of view.

The oral examination should not be optional. While the importance of the oral examination in the final grade should be left to the instructor's discretion, all students should sit an oral examination during the course.

It is the authors' opinion that oral examinations should be attempted by instructors. However, for the students to fully benefit from oral examinations, it is recommended that the students receive several lectures, or even take a course, in business psychology and business communications.

Experience will permit the evaluator to tell the student that the question has been answered so that there is no doubt the student knows the material well. An experienced evaluator will know when to say: "Stop it - that's enough. You know the answer!!"

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Summary of Round Table Discussion Groups

NACTA Conference
June 22, 2007

Topic 1: Motivating Students to Learn and Become Life-Long Learners

1. Key opportunities/challenges for your topic:

- Website created to supplement the lecture. Negative side of this is students do not want to attend class.
- Students showing a huge disinterest when they

believe they do not need the course.
- Nontraditional students appear to be extremely motivated.
- Students bringing phones to class and consequently do not take notes, they expect the professor to post the notes.
- Student profile and class size is a big issue to motivation.
- Technology is sometimes a distraction; laptops with wireless.
- Costs of tuition; physical and mental exhaustion.
- Technology can provide industry connections with management
- Treating real life experiences with real-world application opportunities.
- Students should take responsibility to become life-long learners.
- Relevance
- Developing a work ethic
- Excitement

2. Action plan to address challenges/opportunities:
- Give quizzes at the beginning of class to motivate them to come to class.
- Require that phones not be brought to class.
- New teaching techniques for students because of age range of today's students.
- Making class material applicable to students.
- Emphasize real-world with alumni, business and industry.
- Handpick recent graduates.
- Summer internships
- Class sizes
- Mentors
- Four year managerial program needs meaning.
- Post graduates.
- Changing classroom methods
- Relevance
- Prepare students for career change in this life time.
- Help overcome the past perceptions of class
- Encourage students to take risk and maybe reward them for taking risk or not penalizing them for taking risks.
- Avoid note learning.
- Cultivate reading habit through assignments, papers, etc.
- Repetition
- No whining
- Work on experimental/interactive learning
- Clearly articulate expectations at first day of class
- Show excitement from teachers; have their students realize their passion.

3. Personal experiences/examples of plans or actions related to the topic that were

a. Successful:
- Turn off internet access in the classroom.
- Ban cell phones.
- Make the students take the notes; post limited notes on web.
- Bang on desk when students nod off to sleep.
- Unique methods to teach all students regardless of their age or background.
- Understand that not all students are motivated the way that "I" the professor am motivated.
- Mentorship program
- 1st year program
- Office visits
- Requires technology with laptops in the classroom.
- Post graduates
- Do math and calculate money value tuition for missed classes.
- Good teachers influenced our own "career goals" for our table group members.
- Hands on activity
- Adaptive research
- Pre-reading helps
- Formative assignment with rewards

b. Not Successful:
- Doing too much for them; they get lazy.
- Too much material; information overload.
- Award systems

4. Additional comments or key point discussed:
- Need to be positive and provide encouragement to our students.
- Non-motivated students are universal throughout the world as pointed out by a professor from Africa.
- Understand that not all students desire a four year degree; some are happy with two years.
- Provide the research tools for the students to dig for themselves.
- Independent confidence.
- Engage the students; take field trips, contests
- Do we have a motivation problem?
- Institutional differences
- What is the definition of motivation? (Different with life-long learning)

Topic 2: Engaging Students with Diverse Learning Styles and Background in the Classroom

1. Key opportunities/challenges/action plans for your topic:
- Opportunities for critical thinking- share view points
- Benefit - choice of focus among projects (English majors vs. Science)
- Play to their strengths
- There are still essential skills to cover – early

assessment; additional help sessions (voluntary):
- Ability to get students to help others – more experience to less experience
- Motivation – certificates
- Group work
- Small groups – mixed experience – leaders emerge or assign.
- Individual and group grades
- Diversity makes groups and experiences stronger
- Cover content – hard to cover everything and still balance with group work.
- Outside of class time assignments – they learn more
- WebCT / blackboard / Wolfware / You tube
- GER - relating to future everyday life – tie in diverse groups
- Content depth – problem but fact of class
- Tell the students this isn't high school
- Make them accountable for their actions

3. Personal experiences/examples of plans or actions related to the topic that were
a. Successful:
- Make attendance mandatory
- End of lecture summary sheets (bonus)
- Pop quizzes/group work
- Additional readings for students with less experience
- Pre-test – show students with lots of experience that they do not know "everything"
- Personal interviews when they get exams back
- Learning style quiz – create assignments for each group
- Survey function of WebCT to track how things are going

b. Not Successful:
- Change mode halfway through semester
- "Anonymity" with discussion forums

Topic 3: Developing Students' Abilities yo Think Critically and Understand Concepts

1. Key opportunities/challenges for your topic:
- Students wanting 'cookbook' instructions and inform action
- Increased faculty time
- Students not motivated
- What are the opportunities published out there to help?
- How do you do this?
- Perceptions/biases
- What students bring with them to the classroom environment.
- Political/social issues – (a) immediate concerns broadening, (b) faculty assist in 'seeing' the big picture, (c) decisions in their own facts and (d) decisions based on these facts.
- Willingness to make decisions rather than being told
- Employers demand graduates make better decisions, which in turn promotes maturity when making decisions and creates more leadership opportunities.
- Some students will resist the challenge.
- Science based terms and terminology…only so much time. Are students able to learn and speak/write using the language…for transition and involvement in higher-level courses that require higher levels of learning.

2. Action plan to address challenges/ opportunities
- Tools to reduce increased faculty time included (a) comparisons to journal articles, (b) peer review, (c) rubrics, (d) minimal marking, and (e) Flechman's readability in word
- Teaching methods – case studies
- Define critical, utilized skills such as writing
- Rethink course work and curriculum
- Promote homework assignments which promotes critical thinking
- Compare and contrast issues, facts, opinions, etc
- Greater use of teaching assistants
- Move the level of understanding from the teacher to the assistants, and then to the students
- Use more internal motivation rather than external motivation
- Have students question themselves on how they think and why they think this way
- Move to enlighten or illuminate students understanding; new viewpoints or misconceptions
- Think critically; look across multiple variables and viewpoints.

3. Personal experiences/examples of plans or actions related to the topic that were
a. Successful
- Current news articles – 1st 15 minutes of class discussion
- Wikipedia as a source – ask "is this a reliable source"
- Threading themes throughout all lectures
- Case studies
- Role play
- GRE questions
- Brain teasers
- Internships
- Experiences that promote individuality and maturity
- Pre-lab/pre-teaching; getting students ready to learn
- Giving assignments before actual teaching and learning situations.
- Use of technology outside the class in non-formal settings
- Students complete assignments outside of class; bring with them to the f-2-f sessions.

• Lab activities with real-world application, from basic applications, concepts, and principles.

b. Not Successful
• When students checked out!
• Students do not like to read, too much 'stuff' on the Internet
• Students do not like to think on their own but instead want it given to them.
• Inability to move into higher levels of thinking

4. Additional comments or key points discussed:
• Study guide or cheat sheets for exam for summarizing course
• Teach students to learn to think
• Provide an experience and then reflect on the experience
• Create new/different perspectives and understanding
• Put in your lesson plans and your syllabus specific items students will do and learn about; must be persistent about it
• Hold yourself and students accountable
• Set the standard high and encourage students to go above and beyond the standard to right up front in your classes
• Set the bar high; stay the course for at least three weeks and then adjust accordingly
• Promote a mutual respect for alternative ideas/thoughts/view points
• Create an understanding of all sides of an issues, not just your personal perspective.

Topic 4: Implementing Brain-Based Pedagogical Practices

1. Key opportunities/challenges for your topic:
• Learning more about the brain can provide an opportunity to enhance teaching
• Brain physiology is important in understanding how students learn and how best to teach the material
• Differences in males/females relative to developmental differences
• Understanding the differences between novices and experts…let our students know what it takes to be an expert in this area

2. Action plan to address challenges/ opportunities:
• Must develop activities to engage all parts of the brain
• Find ways to help students "think about the doing"
• Learning is contextual. Make certain that as teachers we help make students understand the connections
• Use methods to determine where students are in the thought process and use that information to connect to information that they don't know

3. Personal experiences/examples of plans or actions related to the topic that were
a. Successful:
• Teach to use all parts of the brain, not just the cognitive part of the brain
• Simulations, application
• Using old exams as examples and help students work through the problem solving aspects of answering the question
b. Not Successful:
• Continue as we have always done
• Teaching to the cognitive part of the brain
• Traditional lectures alone are not enough to engage students in the learning process

4. Additional comments or key points discussed:
• We are planning to create a bibliography of resources that will be forwarded under separate cover.

Topic 5: Providing Capstone Experiences for Students

1. Key opportunities/challenges for your topic;
• Multidiscipline involvement; team work or group work (similar to 'real world')
• Journaling to get depth of experimental application
• Work in a real world context
• Strategic planning
• Work out budgets
• "Market ready graduates"
• Creativity
• Increase student confidence; self-efficacy
• Group work
• Ambiguity – i.e. leadership, since it is so broad, what would they do?
• Equality (or lack of) in participation
• Can miss an element of reality

2. Action plan to address challenges/ opportunities:
• Grading ideas include combining peer and instructor grading, having a clear rubric, and peers evaluate group members
• Administrators must be careful who teaches these capstones
• Good facilitators willing to take risks
• Allow/encourage capstones to count for scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)
• Participation grading; 6 people with a total of 600 points. Grade each member as they wish but it must add up to 600 points.

- Group members rank individually and hand in to the instructor.
- Be up front with industry and students about assignment
- Relevance - keep it relevant
- Incorporate both writing and speaking
- Vertical course integration
- Try different grading skills and keep class size to less than 30

3. Personal experiences/examples of plans or actions related to the topic that were

a. Successful:

- Involved diversity of courses to date
- Have students develop their own grading rubric
- Can teach students how to think on their feet (re-walking outside, asked on the spot about weed ID, how to control and insect pressure, etc)
- Designing the ideal ag-ed program, teaches students program planning, great writing
- Critical thinking – herd management plans, working with business enterprises, doing SWOT analyses, and negotiating grades

b. Not Successful:

- Instructor didn't relate back to the courses; students had to make it more relevant
- Challenge in two year programs (ag tech) because they are rushed

4. Additional comments or key point discussed:

- A capstone is interdisciplinary that provides transportation from college to work and transferable skills
- Capstones includes application of prior knowledge
- It's problem based or client based
- Includes working in groups
- Need to be a senior or at least of the junior year
- Capstones bring all other coursework and experience together through higher-order thinking
- Synthesis and application
- Different from an internship because it attempts to synthesize the whole of experiences students have had

Topic 6: Assessing Student Learning

1. Key opportunities/challenges for your topic:

- Expand assessment beyond course grading
- Accreditation and engineering requirements
- Assessment should be for program improvement
- Online students are more difficult to motivate
- Inadequacy of understanding assessing organizations/expectations and appropriate measurement tools (i.e does an exam count?)
- Difference between what you know and what you learned (progress)
- Promotes an in-depth discussion of the current curriculum (both department and college) by faculty
- Identifies what general education courses are needed (especially for writing and oral communications)
- Assessment efforts will eventually improve the overall curriculum and enhance student learning
- Assessment is more than measuring student test scores, it will provide a motivation for faculty to be better instructors
- How is learning assessment measured and accomplished? Not all faculty have this expertise. Need instruments other than course content
- Assessment learning plans are often mandated by University administration. Not an effective motivational tool for faculty to implement and follow through
- Assessment learning activities requires adequate support for faculty (staffing, operational expense)
- Not all faculty members are willing to buy in. Where are the incentives?
- Too many changes in administration. Faculty have to adjust to a new attitude/approach

2. Action plan to address challenges/ opportunities:

- Pre-test/post-test – time issue (enough?)
- Multiple tools required – more evidence, with in reason, the better
- Games/quizzes
- Assess with multiple assignments – opportunity for varied learners
- Design capstone class assignments like real business group assessment
- Give feed back on homework's but not always grade/count

3. Personal experiences/examples of plans or actions related to the topic that were

a. Successful:

- Use multiple assessment points
- Peer assessment of individuals in a group – related to grades
- Certain reflective writing
- End of program – reflection of the whole

b. Not Successful

- Alumni and exit interviews often after the fact
- Attendance should not be involved in assessment
- Online assessment that is open to "cheating"

4. Additional comments or key points discussed:

- Qualitative vs./and quantitative
- Too much responsibility put on professor for

attendance and performance; should be students responsibility
- Departmental head must take the leadership to implement needed changes. It is important to first build enthusiasm among the faculty for change/improvement
- Must provide outcome feedback on a regular basis. Assessment learning results should be reported every six months to faculty and administration
- Must identify deficiencies in curriculum and then report back what was done to correct the problem
- Assessment learning exams to graduating seniors are probably not an effective measurement tool
- Must first develop a college wide plan for assessment learning which departments can follow
- An assessment learning plan is critical for the development of both core and capstone courses

Topic 7: Integrating Technology into the Classroom

1. Key opportunities/challenges for your topic:
- Ethical and privacy issues
- Compatibility of course management/delivery systems
- Training students on technology
- Multiple skill levels
- Server capacity/reliability
- Faculty using technology inefficiently
- Depth of technology knowledge on behalf of students

2. Action plan to address challenges/opportunities:
- Go to an entire laptop campus
- Obtain free trial software for students or a loan program
- Highlight potential repercussions of defying ethics with students

3. Personal experiences/examples of plans or actions related to the topic that were

a. Successful:
- Campus entirely wireless
- Free software to faculty
- Free software training courses for students (or for course credit)
- Opens opportunities for faculty to teach with professors at different universities.

Topic 8: Balancing Teaching Responsibilities with Research and Scholarly Engagement

1. Key opportunities/challenges for your topic:
- Include a graduate student session at NACTA on balancing life/academic responsibilities
- Learning to say "no" in a positive manner
- New faculty members have trouble juggling all responsibilities
- Grants to write grants? To help with balancing responsibilities

2. Action plan to address challenges/opportunities:
- Build opportunities at NACTA to allow content specialists to visit with educational/social science researchers to develop and cultivate research funding proposals/projects
- Give new faculty lower teaching appointments
- Think about research and teaching as one entity that work off each other
- Identify and use a mentor
- Workshops and networking to facilitate grant writing
- Learn from trial and error

3. Personal experiences/examples of plans or actions related to the topic that were

a. Successful:
- Mentoring; sharing experiences within doctoral programs (key or most valuable opportunities)
- Balance all responsibilities by not teaching in the summer
- Collaborate with other departments and faculty – share work load
- Offer opportunities for research in your teaching strategies
- Participation of public schools to assist with education research
- Protect time for research

b. Not Successful:
- Pushing students too far; know this from experience
- Bridging gap between basic and applied scholars

4. Additional comments or key points discussed:
- Variation based on scholarship and how it is recognized at respective institutions
- Identify your research program early on so you know where you are going before you are up for tenure/promotion

Wayne Banwart
NACTA President 2007-2008