

## **A strategy for student engagement in peer student presentations- assessing critical thinking skills**

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It is a common practice for students to give group oral presentations as an assessment task for their practical courses. In 3<sup>rd</sup> year Physiology at the University of Adelaide, students (typically around 80 to 90 in total) work in small groups (n=2 to 4) in a working research laboratory throughout the year, and present their results as a group (10 minutes talk, 5 minutes of questions). This counts for about 1/3 of their final mark in the practical course. We schedule an afternoon for all presentations, run along the same format as a small conference, with two parallel sessions of presentations, with 3 assessors in each session. The students are therefore presenting to an audience consisting of about 40 of their peers, any supervisors or other faculty who elect to attend, and the assessors. A large problem is a lack of engagement of the student audience with the process.

We have struggled to find ways to increase the engagement of the students in the presentation sessions and thereby broaden the learning impact of the group presentations. Initially, questions were asked by the assessors, with questions invited from the student audience. This usually elicited very little response. Following the dictum that “assessment drives learning”, we therefore changed the format so that the students had to formulate questions to ask, and were assessed on those questions. Each group presenting prepared a poster to illustrate their talk which was made available online the week before the actual presentations were scheduled. Students (as groups) were assigned 3 of those posters to read and prepare questions. On the day of the presentations, they were assigned to ask questions to one of those 3. The marking rubric incorporated a section on “group asking questions”: criteria for marking the questions asked, as well as “group presenting”: the criteria for assessing the presentation poster. The students had access to both of these sets of marking criteria early in the semester.

Initial findings are that the presentation sessions are now much more interactive; the assessors now mostly only observe and assess, rather than having to initiate questions. Anecdotally, the students seem to be engaging more in the critical appraisal of the work of their peers. To improve the impact on the students’ critical thinking, we intend to give more guidance well beforehand on how to formulate questions; open ended *vs* closed questions, questions which show some insight *vs* “generic” questions, etc. After doing this, we could increase the marks assigned to the questioning to further drive student engagement.