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Using activity theory to redesign a video supported oral presentation competence development activity in higher education

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Abstract

This is a single site study in a post-1992 university law school in England using activity theory to explore how video recordings of undergraduate law students' oral presentations can be used as a feedback tool to support the development of oral presentation competence. While there is extensive literature on both the role of feedback in higher education and oral presentation competence development, the link between the two areas has had only limited attention. For this study, 19 students enrolled on a level 4 oral presentation competence development unit were interviewed at three points during the academic year. Activity theory was used to reconceptualise the oral presentation competence development activity and to consider how video can best be used as a feedback tool to support the learning activity. The research analysis demonstrates that video can help students to evaluate their own performances and make adjustments to future performances. However, the research also indicates that there are potential barriers to video being used effectively. These barriers can best be overcome by emphasising the social aspects of the activity. In particular, a focus on video recordings of student performances should be delayed until students have gained experience of evaluation and developed subject specific notions of quality through giving and receiving peer feedback. By using activity theory to reconceptualise the activity to emphasise its social aspects and foreground the role of self-evaluation, this research offers an insight into how video

can most effectively be used as a feedback tool to support oral presentation competence development.

1. Introduction

In the general feedback literature, it is acknowledged that approaches to learning that support and encourage formative use of feedback by students are linked to significant learning gains (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Parkin et al., 2012). In the context of oral presentation competence development, having the video of performance available for review by the learner is valuable if they are to make effective use of feedback to improve their performance (Murphy & Barry, 2016; Simpson et al., 2019). However, there is dissatisfaction with current approaches to the use of feedback both in the general literature (Molloy & Boud, 2013) and in the oral presentation competence development research (Tsang, 2018). In this article, activity theory is used to reconceptualise the oral competence development activity as a social, cultural and historical activity mediated by tools and signs (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). The main mediating artefact in this study is the video recording equipment which operates both as a technological tool and as a means by which video content, such as feedback, is communicated. It is argued that examination of video-supported presentation competence learning as a collective activity offers a clearer understanding of how video can best be used to support the competence development of the individual student.

2. Context

The focus of this study is on the interventions used to develop oral presentation competence among undergraduate law students in a range of mainly formal settings. The subjects of the study were all level 4 students studying law at a post-1992 university in England. The undergraduate law degree includes a level 4 unit intended to help give students confidence to participate in courtroom simulations and legal moot competitions (mock appeal cases). Although the unit created was legal in context and included elements of courtroom advocacy, it was not exclusively focused on the specific skills required to present and argue a case in court.

Since 2012, iPads have been used in the classroom to record the student performances. These recordings also include the tutor and peer feedback delivered immediately after each performance. The students are given access to video recordings of their individual performances and the associated feedback. This can be accessed outside of class on their chosen personal electronic device. Alongside the

introduction of this video technology, a new assessment regime was introduced. Under this assessment strategy only 30% of the unit marks are awarded directly for presentation performances. The remaining 70% of the marks are based on a reflective exercise that requires the students to write a reflective portfolio that explores their own development through the year by reference to embedded links to specific presentation recordings. The purpose of this approach is to attempt to shift the emphasis away from tutor judgements about presentation performance and instead focus on the students' ability to evaluate their own performances and plan their future development.

The research is focused on addressing the following two questions:

- RQ1: What elements in the learning activity account for the change or absence of change in how students experience using the recordings and feedback?
- RQ2: How can these recordings best be used to encourage and support student self-evaluation?

3. Literature review

Feedback is only likely to be effective in producing learning gains if it is actively used by the student to evaluate and regulate their own learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Parkin et al., 2012). Much of the literature sees the central goal of feedback as being to help create self-regulated learners (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Self-regulated learning strategies require the students to be active seekers in the feedback process (Leenknecht et al., 2019). Part of that seeking behaviour involves the development of evaluative judgement (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

Evaluative judgement can be defined as “the capability to make decisions about the quality of work of self and others” (Tai et al., 2017, p. 5). Opportunities for students to make judgements about their own work and that of their peers may be more effective than transmissive tutor feedback (McConlogue, 2015). This process is likely to be subject specific, as “standards of quality are contextually bound within disciplinary notions of knowledge and professional practice” (Ajjawi et al., 2018, p. 9). Interventions need to offer the opportunity for students to develop their ability to make evaluative judgements “as a way of being that is contextual, social and cultural” (Ajjawi et al., 2018, p. 9). Self-evaluation supports the generation of internal feedback and the development of academic judgement (Carless & Boud, 2018; Nicol, 2019). Evaluative skills need to be gained through activities that immerse the learner “in the experience of giving, receiving, and interpreting feedback”

(Chong, 2021, p. 98). Interventions that involve co-construction of rubrics and assessment criteria (Ajjawi et al., 2018), that rely on exemplars (Carless et al., 2018; Pitt, 2019), that offer opportunities for self-assessment (Boud et al., 2015) or peer review (Nicol et al., 2014) all help to develop evaluative judgement skills. This development may need to be a staged process. For example, exemplars of written work or performances can be used in the early stages of the learning process to build understanding of disciplinary specific notions of quality before building up to peer review of student work (Pitt, 2019). In respect of peer review, the real benefits come from undertaking the reviewing rather than being reviewed, as this allows students to gain more critical understanding of the relevant criteria which could then feed into the reviewer's own work (Nicol et al., 2014). These interventions all emphasise that feedback should be viewed as "an ongoing socially-embedded process" (Price et al., 2011, p. 894).

The oral competence development literature has tended to focus on social cognitive theory which, like the general feedback literature, includes the goal of self-regulation (De Grez et al., 2014). Recent studies have emphasised the positive impact of observation of public speaking exemplars in the learning process (De Grez et al., 2014). Video is an important tool in both observation and self-observational learning (Barry, 2012; Ritchie, 2016) and can support reflection without increasing anxiety (Tailab & Marsh, 2020). However, the mechanisms by which video supports competence development are not clear in the literature. For example, a recent investigation into peer review of videoed presentations concluded that although the peer reviews did not appear to improve performances, the process of recording and reviewing the videos did have a positive impact (Day et al., 2021). Video recording may help to develop students' ability to self-reflect on their performances (Day et al., 2021; Murphy & Barry, 2016; Ritchie, 2016; Simpson et al., 2019). Indeed, what emerges from the literature on the use of video in oral presentation competence classes is the need to combine different sources of feedback material. It is argued that having the combination of self-assessment, reflection and tutor feedback that video supports the development of "metacognitive awareness and provides students with significant feed-forward" (Murphy & Barry, 2016, p. 224). This observation emphasises that, when used in higher education, video is just one of the tools being used in the learning process (Moffitt & Bligh, 2021). Consequently, the relationship between the learner and the video is not a straightforward one. It will be affected by the learner's goals and may well change over time (Moffitt & Bligh, 2021).

Presentation competence in the legal education context has principally focused on Kolb's (1984) conception of experiential learning. This process involves a cycle of experience, reflection, cognition, and further experience (Davies & Welsh, 2016). However, it is argued that experiential learning gives too much emphasis to individual cognition and too little emphasis to the social, historical, and cultural aspects of learning (Holman et al., 1997). Nevertheless, this approach to the learning process reflects the common view of the legal profession that these skills are individual and inherent (succinctly summed up by Sir Henry Brooke (2015), a former member of the Court of Appeal, when he said that "the greatest advocates are simply born that way").

The focus of this research is on how video of oral presentation performances and feedback on those performances can be used to support the development of oral presentation competence (including effective self-evaluation behaviour) in a legal education context. Perhaps unsurprisingly there is no literature on this narrow issue. However, the learning activity being explored draws on a number of strands of literature which have generally not intersected. Despite the importance of oral presentation competence in legal education, there have been only modest levels of research in this area. There is significant literature on oral presentation competence development away from legal education including the role that video can play in supporting competence development. The focus has tended to be on developing and assessing presentation performance, rather than developing self-evaluation behaviour. There is literature on self-regulation of presentation competence development mainly based on social cognitive theory. This approach does provide a link with some of the wider literature on the role of feedback in learning in higher education. However, this connection is only rarely reflected in the literature.

4. Theoretical framework

Activity theory is founded on the idea that humans develop through a series of social and cultural interactions with the world mediated by tools and signs (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). As an analytical framework, activity theory offers a means to gain insights into the way tools (for example, video recording and playback facilities) and signs (for example, recordings of performance and feedback) mediate between the subject (the student) and the object (competence development). Activity theory is often chosen as a framework for research in higher education "for its direct empirical applicability; used for abstraction, explanation and contextualisation; and valorised for apprehending complex situational dynamics" (Bligh & Flood, 2017, p. 125). While

activity theory is used in this research as an analytical tool to explore the role of video in oral presentation competence development, it is also used to reconceptualise the activity and offer a fresh perspective on the way in which oral presentation competence is cultivated.

Activity theory is not concerned with examining individual difference but with “ways of acting that tend to be consistent across individuals and over time” (Havnes, 2004, p. 162). This focus on the collective rather than the individual might seem to run counter to our experience of oral presentation competence which, as has been shown in the legal context, is often centred on the skills of the individual. However, the collective nature of an individual’s oral presentation is, of course, recognised by the accommodations that a speaker will make to account for the composition of the audience. Audience is just one aspect of context. Context is made up of a number of factors which will have a significant impact on how a speech is conducted. For example, an oral presentation will be different at a wedding, a retirement event, or a university research seminar; even when the people involved as presenter and audience may be the same. The performance is a product of an individual in their social, cultural, and historical context. The unit of analysis then “is the person-in-the-situation, not the person as a separate entity” (Havnes, 2004, p. 162). A class of students will, of course, be made up of individuals with different cultural backgrounds, abilities, and motivations. By focusing on the person in the situation, we do not lose sight of these differences. In a learning activity, each individual faces the demands of the programme of study and social context in which it is situated. However, the relationship between the individual and the context does not operate in only one direction. The participant will also operate as a force that helps shape the social context itself. As Havnes (2004) observes, “the scope of our intention simultaneously goes in two directions; toward the context, and toward the participants. Neither can be understood independently” (p. 163). This focus on the collective activity level allows us “to understand learning as a complex result of tool mediated interactions, rather than as something opaque which happens in a student’s mind” (Hardman, 2005, p. 380).

The research questions are designed to link the social, cultural and historical conception of oral presentation competence development with an activity theoretical analysis of the tool mediated learning activity. Central to researching from this perspective is the idea that all activities are the product of historical developments under particular conditions (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Activity theory is “not wedded to any particular research method but instead starts from the problem and then moves to the selection of a

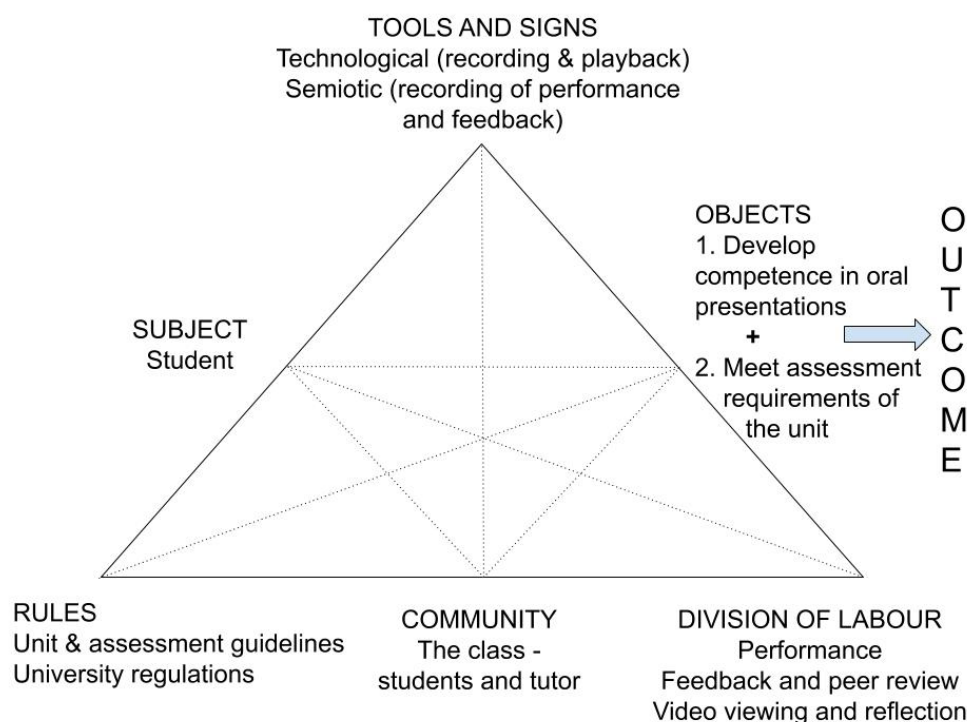
method” (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, p. 72). In this research, phenomenographic methods are used to help understand the range of ways of experiencing the video material. Activity theory offers a means to extend the research beyond the categories of description produced from the phenomenographic analysis to better understand the oral presentation competence activity and, in particular, the role played by the video material.

In order to analyse the activity and the interaction of its components, the activity system can be depicted diagrammatically. The activity system being used for this analysis is shown in Figure 1 (Engeström, 2014). This activity system is based on the intended design of the oral presentation competence development unit. As such it is neither definitive nor immune from change, it merely offers a starting point for analysis. Indeed, the “activity is a highly dynamic system, which is characterised by constantly occurring transformations” (Leont’ev, 2009, p. 401). These transformations result in contradictions in the activity system (Engeström, 2001). These contradictions may be negative in that they operate as barriers within the activity. Conversely, contradictions also provide the driving force behind innovation.

The activity system consists of a number of components.

- The *subject* of the activity is the student learner.
- The *community* is limited to the immediate class and the tutor.
- The *division of labour* requires the subject to engage in performance, peer review, video viewing and reflection on their performances. The tutor provides feedback and the conditions in which the performances take place (i.e., the classroom) and the video material (i.e., recording the performance and feedback and making it accessible).
- The *rules* are at both the unit level (i.e., assessment and class participation) and university level (i.e., observing the relevant university regulations).
- The *tools and signs* are the videos of performance and feedback. The video material consists of both technological elements (i.e., ability to record and the availability of the recordings on the student’s own device) and semiotic elements (i.e., the student’s own meaning making after reviewing the performance and feedback).
- The *object (object 1)*. From a design perspective, the intended object of the activity is to support the development of presentation competence with a particular emphasis on developing self-evaluation skills. The outcome being that the subject will be equipped to continue their development beyond the unit.

Figure 1. The activity system for video supported presentation competence development (based on Engeström, 2014)



- *Object 2* recognises that the subjects of the activity may consider meeting the assessment requirements of the unit to be their motive/object (with the desired outcome of passing the unit). The hope of the unit design is that a focus on the assessment requirements (object 2) will also develop oral presentation competence (object 1).

The diagrammatic representation of the activity (Figure 1) only shows the activity layer. It does not show the hierarchical levels of activities, actions, and operations. For this study, attention will be paid to the chain of subjects' actions which form the activity. Leont'ev (2009) argued that "actions are not separate things that are included in activity" (p. 401), the activity only exists as actions or chains of actions. Student engagement with an oral presentation competence class is likely to involve actions directed towards shorter term goals (e.g., getting through a speech in class without embarrassment). How these actions and motives develop (whether remaining static; becoming subconscious operations; becoming more engaged with the intended activity; or forging new activities) is a crucial focus of the analysis.

5. Research design

Activity theory provides both a lens to reconceptualise the development of oral presentation competence and the tools to explore what interventions can be used to develop the activity to support learners at the early stage of their legal studies. However, the activity, and the use of video in particular, could not be properly understood without taking account of the ways in which the video material is experienced by the learners. To address this concern, Stage 1 of the research seeks to determine the qualitatively different ways in which the video material may be experienced by the learners. Introducing data from the subjective perspective of the learner potentially disturbs activity theory's external view of the collective activity. However, it is submitted that it is important to accept that each student, as the subject of the learning activity, may hold a different perspective on the activity and the tools used in that activity. The use of phenomenographic methods to identify the qualitatively different ways in which the video material can be experienced allows the activity system analysis to take account of these differences. The research questions (Stage 2 of the research) use activity theory to explore how the reported experiences of individual students change through the course of an academic year and considers what interventions might allow

better use to be made of video to support self-evaluation of oral presentation competence.

The research took place in the academic year of 2016/17. The pool of potential participants was limited by the number of students on the level 4 presentation competence development unit (around 100). The aim was to recruit around 20 volunteers. At the start of the year the cohort was told by email that research volunteers were being sought and that further details could be sent on request. This approach resulted in 19 volunteers. 10 of the students who volunteered identified as female and 9 as male (all were assigned the pseudonyms used in this paper). All but two of the students interviewed for this study had come directly from A-Levels taken at schools in the UK. Two of the students (including Ally, who is discussed in the findings) were international students and had come via an international school access course associated with the University. All but one of the students interviewed was aged between 18 and 20 through the course of the interviews. One student, at 22 years old, was the only individual who would be defined as a mature student.

Consistent with the phenomenographic approach taken at Stage 1, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data (Prosser et al, 1994). The first round of interviews was conducted at the beginning of the academic year before any presentations were recorded. The second round was conducted after the participants had completed at least two recorded presentation activities in class. The final round of interviews took place at the end of the academic year. Each of the students interviewed had recorded at least 10 videos by the end of the year. The main focus of the interviews was on the participants' experience of using the video recording. However, other themes were discussed including the participants' prior experience of public speaking and their understanding of the role of feedback. All participants were asked the same set of questions but, in keeping with the semi-structured approach, supplemental questions varied between participants.

The students involved in the study were part of an undergraduate presentation competence development unit that the researcher coordinated and taught on as part of a larger teaching team. The study is therefore insider research (Trowler, 2011). It is acknowledged that the power relationships between interviewer and interviewee may distort the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In particular, the participants are likely to emphasise behaviours that have been encouraged by their tutors and minimise behaviours that they do not perceive as in tune with the unit design.

The participants are likely to be positive about engaging with videos of their performances and feedback away from the classroom. While this may distort the data relating to the level and degree of engagement with the activity, it is unlikely to disrupt the student descriptions of their use and understanding of the video material. It is hypothesised that the most likely point at which the participants would echo the researcher's views of the video material was at the start of the unit (after the role of video has been explained but before it has been used in classes). As a result, the first round of interviews was scheduled just before video was used for the first time (in the fourth week of classes). While the concerns relating to the influence of the researcher's views cannot be eliminated, the first round of interviews was designed to provide some indication of the extent to which the interviewees' reported experiences may have been affected by those views.

6. Findings

The interviews were analysed with the aim of producing a set of descriptive categories where each category is distinct; the categories stand in a logical relationship with one another; and the minimum number of categories is used to capture the critical variation in the data (Marton & Booth, 1997). Five categories were identified to illustrate the qualitatively different ways of experiencing the video material (Table 1).

Through the research process some participants changed their position while others maintained a more consistent description of their experience of using the video material. The first research question seeks to identify the elements within the oral presentation competence learning activity that accounts for this change or absence of change. To answer this question, each category of description was explored using the reported experience of a student most associated with that category. Activity theory was employed for this process. This approach was also used to consider the experiences of a participant who showed the most significant shift in their position in order to understand what factors may have prompted the changes. Finally, there will be some brief discussion of students who did not change their position. The results of this analysis were used to address the second research question by considering how the video material can best be employed to encourage and support student self-evaluation of their own presentation competence development.

Table 1. The qualitatively different ways of experiencing video in an oral presentation competence development unit

Category 1 Negative experience	The video material is experienced in negative terms and does not support learning
Category 2 Part of the requirements of the unit	The video material is experienced as one of the conditions and requirements of the unit rather than as something that supports learning.
Category 3 Memory refreshing	The video material is experienced as something that supports learning by refreshing the students' memory of both the classroom performance and associated feedback.
Category 4 Offers a different perspective on performance and/or feedback	The video material is experienced as something that supports learning by providing a different perspective on the classroom performance and/or associated feedback.
Category 5 Showing change over time	The video material is experienced as something that supports learning by showing change in classroom performance and/or feedback over time.

6.1 Students associated with particular categories of description

6.1.1 Ren — Category 1: Negative experience

Ren reported experiencing the videos in negative terms and showed the closest association with Category 1.

Interviewer: Do you think you gained anything by watching the video?

Ren: Erm... [thinking] to be honest,...

Interviewer: Mmm [yes].

Ren: ... not really.

(Ren, Second Interview)

Ren's actions were focused on avoiding error and, in the case of the video material, avoiding observing anything she might see as an error in her performances. This prevented her from engaging with the videos for much of the year. However, Ren was motivated to achieve a high grade and did engage with the video footage when, eventually, she was forced to by the rules of the activity. Forced engagement did not significantly change Ren's perception of the video material. Ren's experience of the activity is shown in Figure 2. Although Ren ultimately followed the rules of the activity, her negative feelings operated as a barrier to the evaluation of the video material.

6.1.2 Charlie — Category 2: Video as one of the requirements of the unit

Charlie's position throughout the interview process was that he would need to be forced by the requirements of the unit to watch the videos. Charlie's position was founded on two points. First, that direct and active self-evaluation was not something he enjoyed doing and second, that he was already sufficiently self-aware of his performances.

It didn't seem like it would add much for me, 'cos I, I did-, like, even if I watch it, I might see a few things that I wasn't aware of, but I feel like I'm aware of the majority of what went wrong in that moot. Like I can even now remember that, er, the nerves got to me, so I was shaking a bit, my hands, my legs. Erm, also, at one point, I tripped and sort of forgot myself, 'cos I didn't root myself in the text, and I was sort of improvising a bit, and that caused me to stumble. And I, I know that now, even without watching it.

(Charlie, Second Interview)

Charlie described active engagement both with performances and as a peer reviewer. Indeed, Charlie comments positively about the benefits of reviewing the presentations of his peers.

Well, I guess, just in the first place, it means that you're more switched on; you're paying attention more so that you can be-, you're in a position to give feedback. And, also, it, erm... it's helpful in a sort of comparative way, not in comparing myself as in, 'Oh, I'm better than them,' or, 'I'm worse than them,' but just, 'Oh, that's a technique they're using,' 'Oh, that's something they're doing quite

Figure 2. Negative experience of video material as experienced by Ren

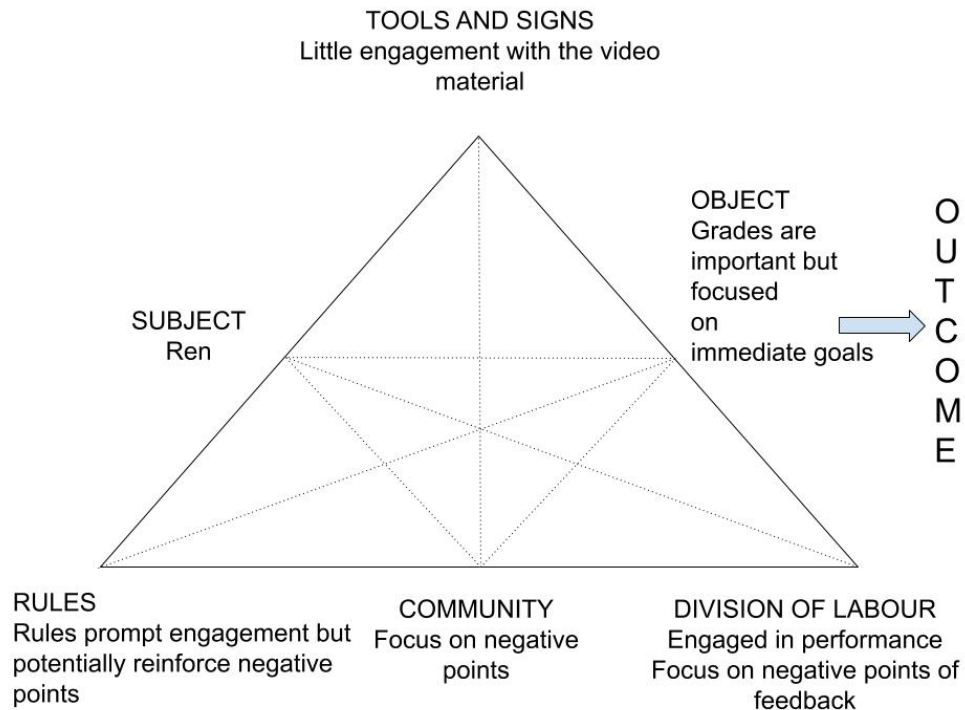
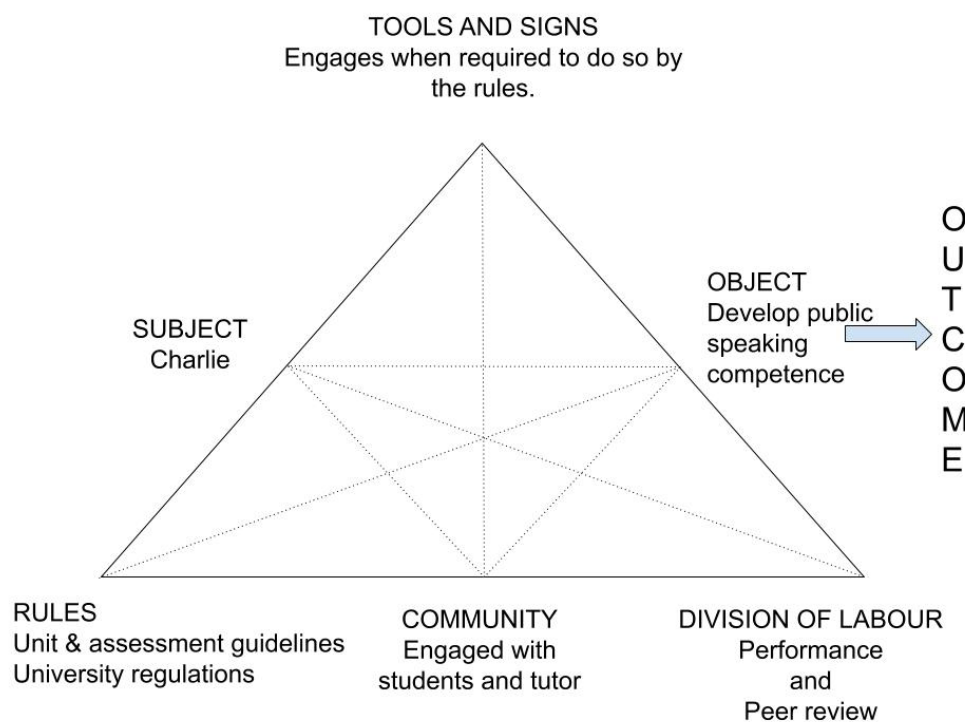


Figure 3. Video experienced as one of the requirements of the unit as experienced by Charlie



§successfully, maybe I should-, maybe I can apply that,' or, er, oh, they don't this that I would then advise them not to do, and also I'd watch out for myself. So it gives you a chance to be quite analytical and, like, 'cos you're not in the moment, you're not reflecting on yourself, you can take a step back and just sort of try and objectively look at it.

(Charlie, Third interview)

Charlie's experiences of using the videos are depicted in Figure 3. In terms of contradictions, it might be argued that the issue is with the rules. Tighter rules might force engagement with the video material and support the development of self-evaluation. However, this conclusion potentially misinterprets the activity. Charlie is highly engaged with an activity where developing presentation competence would appear to be his motive. Further, this motive seems to be supported by a chain of appropriate actions. He appears to be participating in every other facet of the activity other than full engagement with the video material. Arguably, the video material is not operating as the principal mediating tool in this activity system. For Charlie, the activity is mediated by the feedback he receives from peers and tutors; from his own observations of others; and his reflections on his performances.

6.1.3 Ian — Category 3: Memory refreshing

Ian identified as a confident public speaker who valued the videos as a reminder of his previous performances. While he was not keen to watch his performances, he reported that the videos were valuable, and it was worth being forced to do it.

I've kind of got to do it, otherwise I'm not going to make any further improvements, erm, like I'm not going to be able to, like, criticise myself accurately, erm, if I don't watch them. So it's kind of one of those things where I've got to do it, so stop complaining about it.

(Ian, Third Interview)

Ian's example presents a rather mechanistic model reminiscent of transmission feedback practices. The activity (Figure 4) is essentially focused on the top part of the activity system triangle. Ian was motivated to improve his presentation skills and this improvement formed the object of the activity. Ian sought to improve through a cycle of performance, reminder of performance/feedback and adjustment to performance. Ian's actions were directed at the goal of making the next performance better than the last.

The engagement with the bottom part of the activity system was limited to receiving tutor feedback. The contradictions in this activity appear to be associated with Ian's relationship with the broader community and engagement with the rules. Ian's focus on the development of his public speaking through incremental improvement potentially excluded the benefits of the social aspects of the activity (e.g., peer feedback and peer observation). Similarly, Ian's episodic approach avoided engagement with the breadth of video material.

6.1.4 Nell — Category 4: Video offers a different perspective

Nell had initial concerns about watching the videos. However, once she had embarked on watching the videos, she was able to gain a different perspective on her performances and take action based on that perspective. The approach combined elements of observation, use of feedback from tutors and peers, and reflection.

I didn't realise how much I uhmed, and, er, they didn't really say it was bad, but I could hear it when I looked back at it. I was like, 'Oh, I didn't know I uhmed [surprised],' but I did, which was interesting, and I moved my hands, like, 3,000 times, and I was like, 'That's fine, I can work on it,' [smiles].

(Nell, Second Interview)

Nell's relationship with the video material was very close to the design of the unit (Figure 5). Nell's reported perceptions of the video material suggested that she viewed it in quite different terms to the class activity. In particular, it provided a tool for revealing information about the performance and feedback that would not otherwise be available. Working through the activity system (Figure 5), it can be seen that Nell was an active part of the division of labour. She received feedback from the tutor and peers and provided peer reviews. The community aspect of the learning was clearly relevant to Nell as she described the learning gains available from working with the group. The rules in the activity supported Nell's use of the video material as a tool to evaluate her own performances.

It is interesting to compare Nell with Ian. They were both highly engaged participants in the activity. However, the qualitatively different ways that Ian and Nell made use of the video material have a significant impact on what each gained from the activity. For Ian, the videos supported his iterative improvement. However, for Nell the videos provided more significant insights into her performance and how

Figure 4. Video experienced as a memory refreshing tool as experienced by Ian

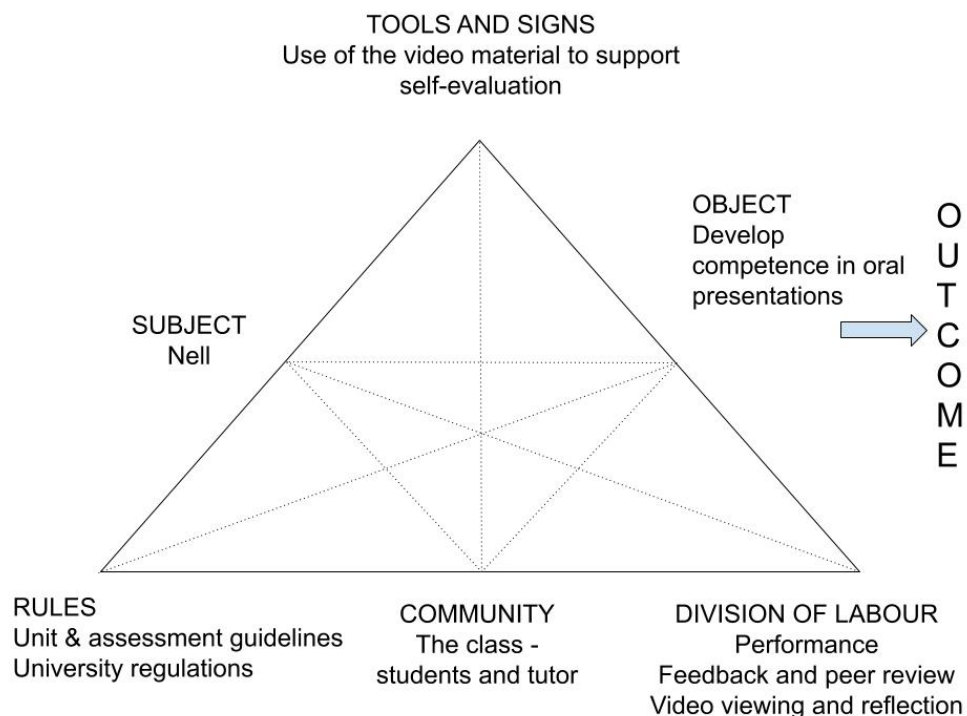
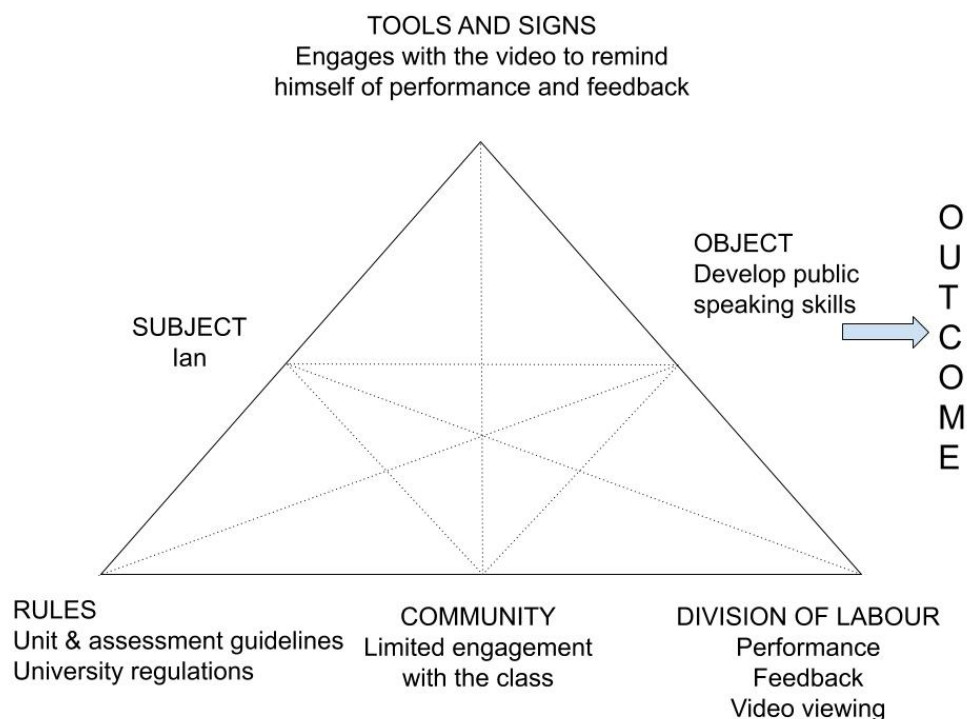


Figure 5. Video experienced as tool that changes perspective as experienced by Nell



to develop her oral presentation competence. The barrier free connections that Nell enjoyed with the rules and community afforded her greater opportunities to develop her competence. However, what cannot be said from this comparison is the extent to which there was a connection between perception of the video and engagement with the community within the activity.

6.1.5 Ally — Category 5: Video shows change over time

For Ally, the videos and the activity as a whole were viewed in a wider context (Figure 6). By the third interview, the videos were perceived as a body of material that could be used to observe and reflect on her performances.

I think it's the fact that you get to... for me, personally, it's just watching over-, 'cos sometimes people don't like hearing their voice, I think it's watching over those videos as well and just, you know, looking at the little things that-, like my hand gestures and like, you know, not being too insecure or bothered with my accent anymore, and stuff like that. Yeah [half-laugh].

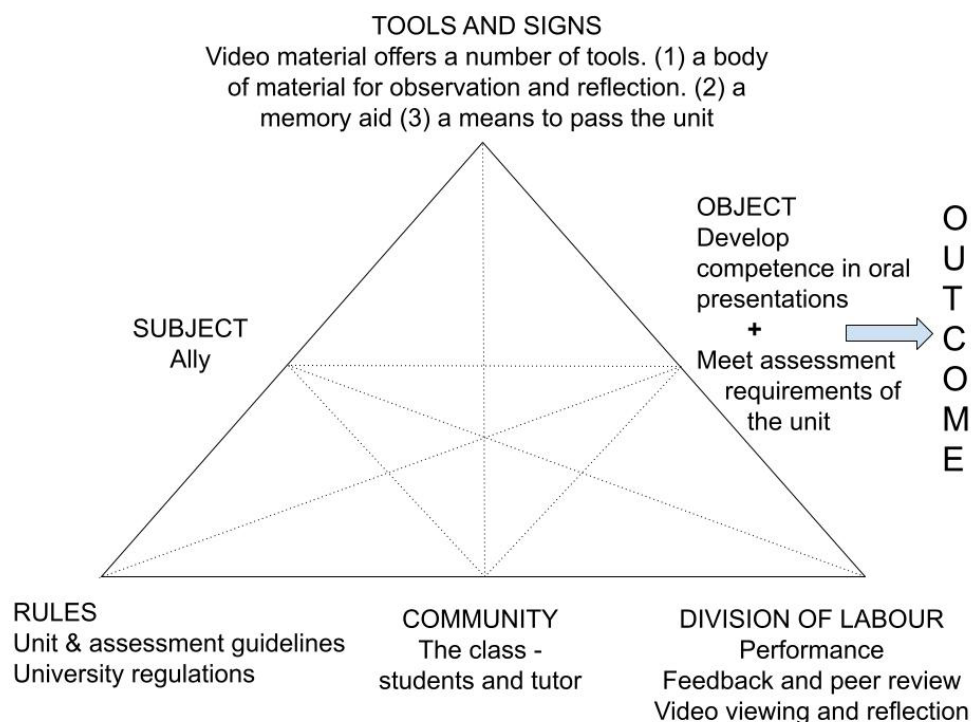
(Ally, Third Interview)

In common with Nell, Ally showed a close connection between her own performances and the benefits of working with peers. Indeed, the examples of Ally and Nell suggest a close connection between working with their peers and perceiving the videos of their own performances as something more than a memory aid. They both contrast with the more limited peer engagement of Ren, Charlie and Ian. So, while fear and scepticism operate as reasons for not watching the videos, limited engagement with the peer activities may limit the value of the video as a tool for self-evaluation.

6.2 Changing position: April

April offers an example of transition through the course of the unit. At the first interview, before recordings had started in class, April presented perceptions that were focused on Categories 3 and 4. This perhaps reflects her engagement with the course materials and the classes up to that point. By the time of the second interview, this position had changed and there was now a barrier preventing April from engaging with the video material. Indeed, April's actions in the system were geared to not watching the videos with the goal of avoiding it for as long as possible.

Figure 6. Video shows change over time as experienced by Ally



I thought I would watch it beforehand. I was like, 'Yeah, that would be good.' But then, when I actually came to it, I'm like, 'Do I really want to see myself again doing that speech?' and I was like, 'No, not really [apprehensively].'

(April, Second Interview)

Despite these negative experiences of the recorded performances, April maintained the perception that viewing the performances would be beneficial. Further, she would engage with them in accordance with the requirements of the assessment task. By the third interview, near the end of the academic year, there was a significant shift in April's perceptions and actions. In particular, the video material became a useful memory aid (Category 3). Perhaps more significantly the videos, as a body of work that shows her progress, were perceived as playing a significant role in April's development.

Although nerves are still there, but now it's just more I know how to deal with them and I know, like, what I am like in public speaking because of the videos, and I made changes and I feel a lot more confident in doing it. So, yeah.

(April, Third Interview)

It is tempting to argue that the key contradiction in the system was the barrier that was preventing April from engaging with the videos. Certainly, April acknowledges that it was the rules of the activity that eventually forced her to engage with the material. The solution, therefore, might be to change the rules to require (rather than just recommend) engagement with the videos early in the unit. However, looking at the whole of April's interviews, there are two reasons why that might be an overly simplistic way of viewing the activity. Firstly, it is clear that the benefit of the video material that April perceived was related to it showing development. Secondly, there is evidence in the interviews with April that suggests that the contradictions also run in other directions in the activity system. By the time of the second interview, the social aspects of the activity, in particular April's links to the community and division of labour in the activity system, were important to her development in the activity.

I really appreciated actually working in a group with the helpful side of the group, erm, because you're like, 'Oh, I didn't actually think of that before [interestingly], but then they would have. And, also, like, when you practise it, they would be there like, 'I'm not sure if you've noticed, but you pronounced this wrong,' and you would

be like, 'Oh [interestingly].' And it's just-, it's a lot easier; it gives you a bit more confidence.

(April, Second Interview)

April's experiences suggest that the social aspects of the activity should be emphasised during the early stages of the unit (e.g., students working on and delivering speeches in small groups). Although recordings should be made of performances and feedback throughout. April's example suggests that student engagement with those recordings might be usefully delayed until each student has a body of material upon which to reflect. The following diagrams depict the difference between the activity April was experiencing at the time of the second interview (Figure 7) and what she experienced at the end of unit (Figure 8).

6.3 Absence of change: Anthony, Cameron and Connor

It is worth giving some brief consideration to participants who did not significantly change their position through the three interviews. To varying degrees Anthony, Cameron and Connor were all engaged with the activity. They each expressed their motivation to improve their public speaking. However, there appear to be several contradictions in the activity system. The main perception of the video is as a means to be reminded of errors and tutor feedback. In terms of the community and the division of labour, these participants see limited value in the giving and receiving of peer feedback. The focus is on the tutor feedback, both in the classroom and as part of video material. There are no significant barriers to them watching the videos (although Anthony queries the value of watching his own performances). Their engagement with their peers is limited. The limitation appears to reflect a perception that engagement with the wider community in the activity is of limited value.

7. Discussion

The prevailing perception from this study is that students view the video as a positive element in the learning activity. For some students the videos have value as a simple memory aid. For others, the videos operate as a tool that changes their perception of their performances and allows them to better understand their development. Consideration needs to be given to what factors influence student perception of the video and how the activity might be adjusted to allow video to better support student learning.

Figure 7. April's experience of the video at the point of the second research interview

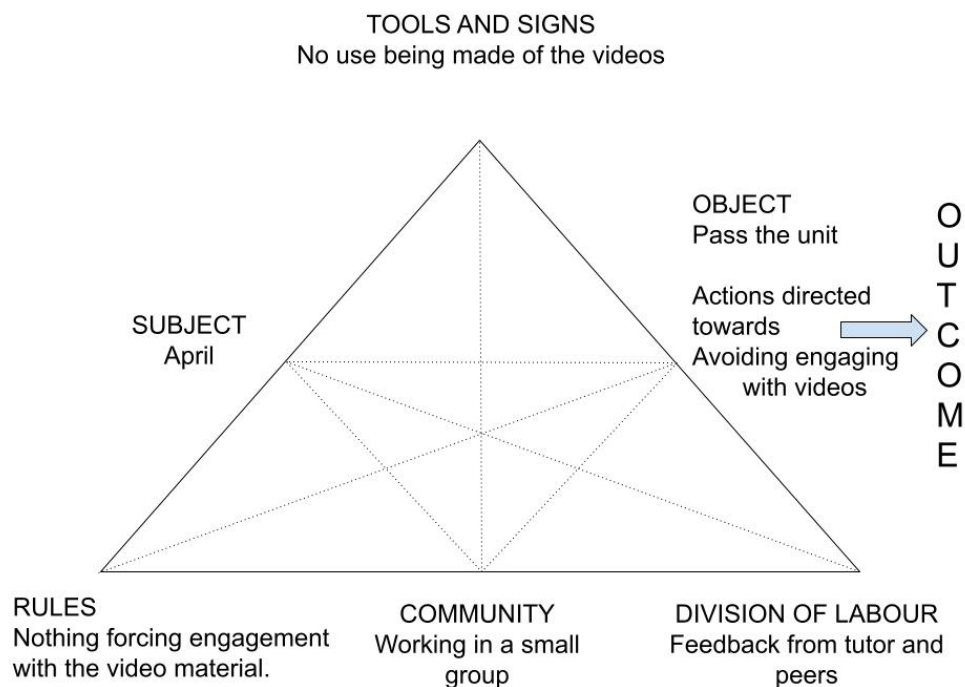
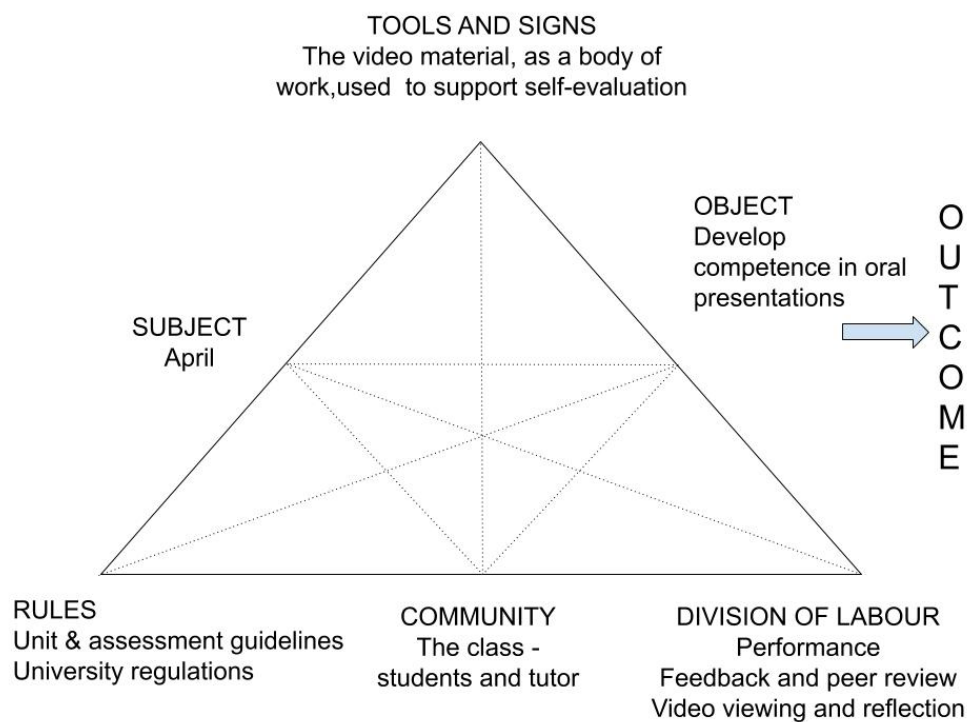


Figure 8. April's experience of the video at the end of the academic year



7.1 Barriers to effective use of the video material

The experiences that Ren describes suggest that some students will find the prospect of watching themselves perform on video too uncomfortable. Fear as a barrier to engagement is something recognised in the general feedback literature (see Carless & Boud, 2018; Chong, 2021). Similarly, Charlie not recognising the video recordings as a potential source of feedback has parallels with the challenges of fostering engagement with feedback that is not provided by the tutor (McConlogue, 2015). Ren and Charlie were both ultimately influenced by the rules that required all students to engage with the videos in order to be able to pass the unit. However, enforcing engagement did not alter their perception of the value of the videos. Anthony, Cameron and Connor offer an insight into the likely outcomes if engagement with the video is achieved mainly as a result of the rules requiring it. They are essentially happy to engage with the activity as presented in the classroom. They are neither moved to avoid engagement nor are they looking to engage more than the rules demand. Based on these three students, it might be reasonable to conclude that for many engaged students the main quality of the video material is that it is a useful memory aid. Certainly, the rules can be tightened to increase engagement with the videos. However, enforcing engagement is unlikely to change the prevailing perception that the videos are no more than a useful memory aid.

There is evidence in the interviews that the videos can offer much more than a useful memory aid. The example of April suggests that perceptions can be developed through the course of the year. Importantly, April provides an example of someone who at one point experiences the videos as something that she could not engage with at all. However, within the course of the unit she was able to shift that perception to see the videos as a valuable learning tool that showed both a different perspective and change over time.

7.2 The role of community

The analysis of the activity system seems to suggest that the difference between Category 3 (memory aid) and Categories 4 and 5 (different perspective and change over time) relates to engagement with the social context. This accords with the wider feedback literature which suggests that the feedback process needs to be more than mechanistic and must be socially situated (Price et al., 2011). Certainly, the difference between Ian, Anthony, Connor and Cameron on one side and April, Nell and Ally on the other, is the extent that the latter group engaged with their peers. In respect of April, it was the community aspect of the activity, rather

than the rules, that ultimately prompted her full engagement with the video.

7.3 Video and meaning making

The video material is part of the feedback process within the activity. At one level, it can be viewed as something that is externally generated and provided to the student. It contains feedback from the tutor and peers and a recording of the student's own performance. In essence this is not unlike the return of a written assignment with tutor comments. As with tutor feedback on written work, the student receiving this feedback can note the issues raised and apply that feedback to the next episode. This type of transmissive feedback can support development but, without more involvement from the learner, the learning gains may be limited and episodic (Price et al., 2011). Students need to be able to make evaluative judgements about what they observe in their own work and in the work of others (McConlogue, 2015; Tai et al., 2017).

In viewing the videos, students are being asked to engage in a new form of feedback activity. Their prior feedback experience is based on the idea of "the tutor as expert marker" (McConlogue, 2015, p. 1504). They need to develop their feedback literacy (Molloy et al., 2020) to make use of the peer, self and tutor feedback contained in the videos. However, this is not simply a matter of gaining familiarity with a new source of feedback, they also need to develop an understanding of quality relevant to the subject they are studying. The students in this study were new to undergraduate law and their experience of formal public speaking training was limited. Their understanding of subject specific standards and methods of working is likely to be a barrier to their ability to engage with the video footage effectively at an early stage of the activity (Ajjawi et al., 2018; Esterhazy & Damşa, 2019). The interviews suggest that the way that discipline specific notions of quality are best achieved is through working with the tutor and, crucially, with peers to develop their understanding of standards. The examples of Nell and Ally suggest that there is a close relationship between engagement in peer learning opportunities and effective use of the video as a self-evaluative tool. April perhaps offers evidence that the peer learning activities are a significant factor in developing the use of the video material as a tool for supporting self-evaluation.

The importance of developing evaluative skills through safe peer group activities has support in the wider literature on feedback and evaluative judgement. The development of evaluative expertise needs to be a gradual process (Carless & Boud, 2018) and one that is "contextual, social and cultural"

(Ajjawi et al., 2018, p. 9). Indeed, much of the focus in the literature is on the processes that build the ability to evaluate. For example, co-construction of rubrics and assessment criteria (Ajjawi et al., 2018), use of exemplars (Pitt, 2019), use of supported self-assessment (Boud et al., 2015) and peer review (Nicol et al., 2014). Pitt (2019) offers a particularly pertinent parallel with this study as it involves the use of exemplars to build understanding of disciplinary notions of quality before moving on to peer review of student work.

7.4 Developing the activity

The object of this oral presentation competence development unit is not just to make each performance better than the last but rather to create learners who can effectively self-evaluate their own performances and adjust their approach accordingly. That said, incremental development within the activity is important both to the student and to the building of the video material. The video material changes throughout the year. Through the year, as each student builds a body of videoed performances, the mediating tool changes. The creation of individual videos might be viewed as intermediate goals within the wider activity. These videos are not the final product but are vital intermediate products. The mediating tool in the activity develops as the collection of performances and feedback grows. This collection of material becomes the mediating tool, rather than episodes of single performances (Murphy & Barry, 2016; Simpson et al., 2019), as it allows students to understand their own development against their growing understanding of quality. This allows the students to make the adjustments they need to their next performance, which will, in turn, form part of the body of video material. However, this study suggests that students will not automatically perceive the videos as anything more than an episodic memory aid. The design needs to be adjusted to help students to develop their ability to evaluate their own performances. It is argued that this might best be achieved by emphasising peer learning at the early stages of the learning activity.

The results of this research suggest a number of adjustments to the activity that would offer a better prospect of creating something that supports self-evaluative oral presentation competence development. The students should have an opportunity to work with the tutor and their peers to develop their understanding of law specific notions of quality in oral presentations. This should be approached using the existing tutor supported oral presentation activities conducted within a small group of peers. These activities should include tutor feedback and peer review. The performances and feedback should continue to be recorded. However, this research suggests that there are good reasons

why the students should not be asked to engage with their videos during the early stages of the unit. The video material presents a challenging prospect for students. Concerns about watching the videos was a prominent theme with most students. April's example suggests that the video became easier to view after she had become more comfortable through engaging with the peer learning activities. This is not simply a matter of the video becoming more comfortable to watch as the activity becomes more familiar. It has more to do with significant changes in the nature of the activity which mean that engagement with the video material has become more valuable and, hopefully, less daunting for the students. The first change is that the student will have, through working with the tutor and peers, developed a greater understanding of notions of quality and be better placed to be able to make judgements as to the quality of what they observe. The second change is that the video material, as the mediating tool, will also have changed fundamentally. It will not be a simple episode of videoed performance and feedback but something quite different. It will be a collection of performances and feedback over time that, in most cases, shows development and therefore will be more comfortable for the students to engage with. The students will be better equipped to engage with the evaluation of their video material having developed their knowledge and experience through peer review activity in the early stages of the unit.

8. Conclusion

In common with much activity theoretical research, the theoretical framework for this study has provided “empirical utility” (Bligh & Flood, 2017, p. 148) to the analysis. Following Yamagata-Lynch's (2010) view of this empirical utility, the theoretical framework has allowed a focus on the oral presentation competence activity as a manageable unit of analysis, broken the activity into its elements to identify systemic implications, supported the analysis and understanding of the systemic contradictions and tensions, and depicted the findings diagrammatically. Bligh and Flood (2017) argue that activity theory's analytical usefulness means that it “is rarely chosen to directly challenge prior conceptualisation of the research object, or because of interest in the theory *per se*” (p. 148). However, in this research activity theory has been chosen as the theoretical framework because of what it offers in terms of understanding of the nature of the social world and how it can be used to reconceptualise the oral presentation competence development activity.

Oral presentation skills are often viewed in individual terms. Activity theory shifts the focus away from the individual to view oral presentation competence development

as a collective activity, not only engaging the speaker and the audience but also encompassing the social, cultural, and historical context. Approached in this way, the research emphasises the importance of the social aspects of the activity. Activity theory in this research operates “as a vehicle for ‘thinking otherwise’” (Bligh & Flood, 2017, p. 148) about the learning process. Activity theory allows the research to *reframe* (Bligh & Flood, 2017) our understanding of the oral presentation competence development activity so that it focuses on the person-in-the-situation rather than the person as a separate entity (Havnes, 2004). This *reframing* allows light to be shed on the relationship between the social context and the self-evaluation based competence development.

Activity theory provided a new framework for conceptualising the learning activity. However, it was important not to lose the learner or their perspective on the activity. The learner is, of course, part of that wider activity. They will not only be changed by the activity but will also prompt change within the activity. The idea that the activity might be changed by the learner has a particular resonance in this research. The relationship between the individual and the video material is a highly dynamic one. Not only is the tool changed through the course of the year as more videos are added but the relationship between learner and the tool changes as the learner experiences the video in different ways.

Activity theory has provided both a lens to reconceptualise the development of oral presentation competence and the tools to explore what interventions can be used to develop the activity to support learners at the early stage of their legal studies. However, the activity, and the use of video in particular, could not be properly understood without taking account of the ways in which the video material is experienced by the learners. To address this concern, the first stage of the investigation sought to determine the qualitatively different ways in which the video material may be experienced by the learners. Introducing data from the subjective perspective of the learner potentially disturbs activity theory’s external view of the collective activity. However, it is submitted that it is important to accept that each student, as the subject of the learning activity, may hold a different perspective on the activity and the tools used in that activity. The use of phenomenographic methods to identify the qualitatively different ways in which the video material can be experienced allows the activity system analysis to take account of these differences. The resulting activity theory analysis not only accounts for the different ways of experiencing the video material, it is also able to identify improvements that cater for these differences.

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