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# ASSESSING THE STUDENT: THE PECHAKUCHA APPROACH

*With creativity and innovation as dominant buzzwords in higher education, employing PechaKucha to assess students is worth exploring*

With universities being increasingly encouraged to implement innovative assessment methods, the emphasis is on those methods, which will specifically prepare students with the 'skills' that are widely sought after by employers. Pecha Kucha is one such method that can benefit students within and beyond higher education.

As universities are being increasingly encouraged to implement innovative assessment methods, such innovation serves a twofold purpose. One purpose being, that while traditional forms of assessment such as essays and timed exams remain popular with examiners, there is a plethora of strategies that can be utilised to test students' knowledge, understanding and skills (Race, 2014). The other and equally important point being, universities today face enormous pressure to rethink their curriculum in response to the challenges of an ever-changing world of employment. In *rethinking* the curriculum design, one can argue that this also 'means looking further afield and learning from organisations outside the sector' (Povah and Vaukins, 2017). For the purpose of this article, I have explored the use of the PechaKucha presentation format as a mode of assessment for students. Since its inception in 2003 (Ingle and Duckworth, 2013: 45), the use of this style of presentation has been increasing in popularity across various professional organisations. Advocates of the PechaKucha format, (whereby the presenter shows 20 PowerPoint slides and is given 20 seconds per slide before the presentation advances automatically) argue that this technique represents a valuable way of using technology in the classroom, thus enhancing creativity and innovation across curricula. This article

outlines how students can benefit from using PechaKucha for assessment purposes. It proposes that the Pecha Kucha presentation style provides an insight into how students engage in the learning process and how it empowers them with skills that will serve them well for years to come.

## Thinking Creatively: the PechaKucha presentation

While there is nothing new in assessing students through their PowerPoint slides presentations, the PechaKucha method has been widely recognised as more innovative in nature (Klentzin *et al.*, 2010).

PechaKucha (also described as Pecha 20 x 20) is a presentation style in which the presenter displays 20 PowerPoint slides and has 20 seconds per slide before the presentation advances automatically. With the entire delivery lasting no more than six minutes and 40 seconds, this format shows the speaker as mastering (or at least attempting to), 'the art of concise presentations' (Lucas and Rawlins, 2015: 102).

The challenge in delivering content in an engaging and fast-paced manner captures the very essence of the PechaKucha format. The name itself derives from the Japanese term for the sound of 'chitchat', with the speakers interacting in an energetic and innovative manner.

Tokyo-based architects Mark Dytham and Astrid Klein invented PechaKucha on the premise that workplace presentations often take far too long and without people getting to the point (Ingle and Duckworth, 2013: 45). By employing the PechaKucha method, the speaker (and arguably the audience too) is liberated from spending too much time explaining the content of the presentation.







Since its initiation, PechaKucha has been increasing in popularity worldwide, with various professional communities presenting their work, in disciplines ranging from the Arts to those in the business sector (Ingle and Duckworth, 2013: 45). and even within academic communities (Beyer 2011; Fraser, 2014). In a similar vein, the 'PechaKucha' phenomenon has also attracted Universities, instigated in part by the need to prepare students with the employability and entrepreneurial skills that are widely sought after outside the Academy. Communication is one such skill. More specifically, there appears to be a growing emphasis on the need for educators to use the classroom 'space' to provide students with diverse ways to develop effective communication skills; and particularly those skills, which we cannot measure in traditional assessment methods, for instance, essays or exams (Attwood, 2009; Race, 2014). In contrast, PechaKucha as a mode of assessment enables a process whereby students' communication skills can be cultivated as well as put to the test.

In setting an assessment, educators can ask students to deliver their own PechaKucha 20 x 20 'presentation to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of a particular topic or concept' (Ingle and Duckworth, 2013: 46). Advocates of PechaKucha further argue that this practice 'may also be useful in developing and demonstrating learners functional skills in ICT, as well as an opportunity to practice and develop confidence in their public speaking' (Ingle and Duckworth, 2013: 46).

### Using PechaKucha in the classroom

At this point, it is worthwhile emphasising three key factors that can help students understand what is expected of them. To begin with, reiterate that the purpose of this assessment is more than just acquiring academic skills; thus the classroom space is being utilised to prepare students for the world that exists beyond the academia walls. Second, unlike traditional PowerPoint presentations, PechaKucha works within a specific time frame. With only six minutes and forty seconds per presentation, the student is required to effectively communicate their ideas / views within the time limit. In a sense, the method can be likened to storytelling; and the onus is on the students to demonstrate their ability as effective storytellers. Third, presentations require that different methods of communication are employed; verbal (the oral communication skills demonstrated), non-verbal (body language), written (the writing as it appears on the PechaKucha slides) and visual (the images displayed on the PechaKucha slides). Students will have the opportunity to put all of the above skills into practice; and in doing so, keeping in mind that PechaKucha slides are intended to be visually stimulating so students are actively encouraged to be creative and innovative in their design. Following this, students should be shown examples of good PechaKucha presentations so that they get a 'feel' as it were on how PechaKucha presentations work.

Implementing the PechaKucha method in the classroom can be seen as comprising five stages.



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*Unlike traditional PowerPoint presentations, PechaKucha works within a specific time frame. With only six minutes and forty seconds per presentation, the student is required to effectively communicate their ideas within the time limit*

The *first* stage involves explaining the assessment to the students and then moving on to introduce the 'PechaKucha presentation style and its guiding principles' (Lucas and Rawlins, 2015: 103).

The *second* stage entails setting some time aside for students to engage in independent learning (alternatively, this could also be an in-class seminar activity, depending on the time permitted for the session). Students should be directed to the PechaKucha website and asked to review a presentation of their choice; thus paying close attention to the written and visual style using which it has been implemented, and how effective the speaker is in getting their points of view across (guidelines on what the students should be looking out for in the presentation could be provided beforehand). This stage of the process is particularly useful in that the method actively encourages students to make a carefully thought out decision of the presentation they wish to review from the many options available to them and thus be active agents in their own learning. In addition, by familiarising themselves with PechaKucha, this enhances students' understanding around innovative presentation styles.

The *third* stage involves students sharing the observations that they made based on the activity outlined in stage two. Stage three of the process enables students to not only discuss their own understanding of PechaKucha, but also learn from their peers thus engaging with different points of view. This can be done in small groups to begin with and then form part of a larger class discussion thereafter. Lucas and Rawlins (2015: 104) suggest that students also be provided with 'hardcopy or electronic handouts with 20 large squares and space for notes' where they can begin mapping a preliminary sketch of their own presentations. They also suggest dedicating some 'class time to giving students a 'feel' for how long 20 seconds really lasts, and how much can be said in that amount of time' (Lucas and Rawlins, 2015: 105). Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that students are given ample preparation time and support before they go about preparing their own presentations independently.

The *fourth* stage sees each student deliver the PechaKucha presentation to the class. To ensure this is

achieved effectively, the computer in the room should be preloaded with the presentations prior to the start of the class. The timing settings also need to be checked in advance to ensure that each slide show runs smoothly and uninterrupted. Lucas and Rawlins (2015: 105) further stipulate that 'files should be queued in order so presentations flow relatively seamlessly from one presenter to the next (with, of course, a pause for applause from the audience).' Another suggestion involves recording the presentations so that they can be 'used as evidence for summative assessment or as a self-assessment development tool for playback and critique' (Ingle and Duckworth 2013: 46). It is also worthwhile ensuring that technical support is available in case of any technological difficulties experienced on the day. If a member of the IT and audio visual team are not able to be present in the room than at least notifying them in advance of the session can mean that help can be sought more efficiently and effectively rather than explaining 'in the moment' and thus risk losing precious time. This also puts the students at ease if they know help is easily available should we require it.

The *fifth* and final stage is where the assessor (course leader and another fellow academic) provides verbal feedback to the student as well as following this up later with the grade and written feedback. In terms of the grading criteria, Lucas and Rawlins (2015: 105) suggest that 'PechaKucha presentations should be graded by standard public speaking or business communication rubrics.' In addition to the rubrics, there can also be a PechaKucha-specific checklist to ensure that the students complied with the Pecha 20 x 20 style, whether or not the automatic timing was on point, the quality of the photographs provided and so on and so forth. If time permits, the session could also enable students to briefly discuss their own thoughts regarding the assessment. Alternatively, they could complete a self-assessment form commenting how they felt about their performance and adding any comments that they might have about the assessment overall.

In recognition of the above, it is worth noting that an alternative to PechaKucha is Ignite which was launched in the USA in 2006 (Ingle and Duckworth 2013: 45). While it shares the same principles as PechaKucha, the difference is that 'Ignite



presentations are five minutes in length, following a protocol of 20 slides, with 15 seconds allowed for each slide' (Ingle and Duckworth, 2015: 45). While the difference may only be the difference of one minute and 40 seconds, Ignite remains a popular mode of assessment even in schools, particularly those in the USA (Ingle and Duckworth, 2013: 45).

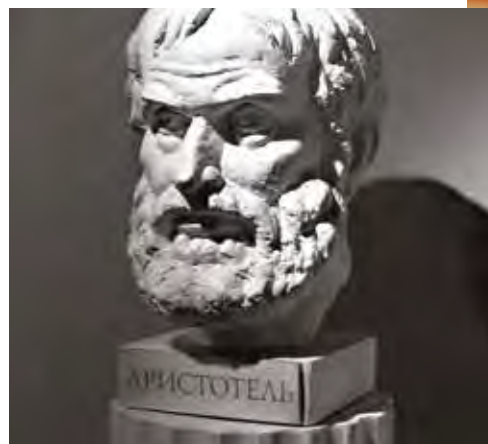
### Student assessments: embracing the PechaKucha method

Drawing on my own teaching experience, I introduced first year undergraduate Law and Criminology students to PechaKucha as an assessment method. It is important to note that not all students were comfortable with presentations; and certainly, for some the idea of speaking in front of the class posed a source of anxiety. However, as I discovered, there is often more than one-way to address an issue, and therefore to encourage students to fulfil the task, Aristotle's (1959) advice in *Ars Rhetorica*, to use 'all the available means of persuasion' is fitting here.

To begin with, the assessment provided a platform whereby students were encouraged to use visual images. Given that the majority of the students were active in social networking sites (i.e. Instagram and Snapchat) where users share photographs, the idea of using images to express their opinions did not represent an unfamiliar territory. Interestingly, drawing on her own experience at Royal Holloway University of London, Huseman (2016) points out that some international students, who were not particularly comfortable with presenting in front of a class, nevertheless 'considered designing powerful visual slides as their strength.'

Another effective strategy is to, where possible, share online additional information that conveys the benefits in completing the very assessment proposed. Race (2014: 162) argues that 'in our digital age, the best content in the world is free, online' and in this instance, a TED Talk (2012) supporting the use of Pecha Kucha is useful viewing for the students. The speaker Eddie Selover uses the platform to express the efforts he made to overcome speech anxiety; which in itself can be an important source of inspiration, especially to those who feel they can relate to these sentiments. Furthermore, with the emphasis on students requiring the right type of skills to increase their chances of becoming employable, watching someone from the 'job' sector promoting the use of PechaKucha enables the students to form a connection to the world of employment and appreciate what might be expected from them beyond the Academia.

Lucas and Rawlins (2015: 106) argue that the PechaKucha format has helped students to 'overcome speech anxiety by centring attention on the short length of time they have for each slide instead of thinking about how long they have to talk.' This coincides with the thoughts of the students I assessed whose first language was not English which points to the universal appeal of this method and endorses the idea that 'everybody has



*The PechaKucha format has helped students to 'overcome speech anxiety by centring attention on the short length of time they have for each slide instead of thinking about how long they have to talk'*





the capacity to be a good communicator' (Neimtus, 2017). What better place to build on these skills than in an environment where students have the support of their tutors and their peers before they enter the competitive world of employment?

In the case of the PechaKucha assessment that I carried out, a point worth noting is how many of the students reported to have enjoyed consolidating the contents of the course differently. It facilitated an opportunity for them to focus precisely on employing diverse methods of communication and as such, this strategy has proven to be more successful with students than the traditional PowerPoint Presentation (Beyer, 2011; Lucas and Rawlins, 2015; Zharkynbekova *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, this assessment format promotes a highly active learning process; thus, motivating students to be active agents in their own learning. All in all, the presentation comprises a range of challenges; including thinking about (and engaging with) 'presentation designs and delivery styles, using eye-catching and powerful visual images rather than [relying on] large amounts of text in bullet points' (Ingle and Duckworth, 2015: 45) thus empowering students with skills that will serve them well for years to come.

### Thinking beyond Higher Education

The PechaKucha method represents good practice for producing powerful and effective presentations, and prepares learners for the communication demands that they will encounter in the workplace. The highly structured nature of the method should not be underestimated; it requires precision, conciseness, and clarity.



*PechaKucha serves as a 'taster' to remind students that the real world of work can ask individuals to innovate and communicate at a pace that is more often than not, unprecedented*

#### Preparing today's student for the ever-changing workplace

World leaders and entrepreneurs often seem rather keen to point out that in a world where time and attention are increasingly in high demand, brevity in communication is imperative. As Branson (2014) points out, 'it's better to say nothing, than spend... [a one hour] speech saying nothing. Get to the point – fast.' PechaKucha serves as a 'taster' to remind students that the real world of work can ask individuals to innovate and communicate at a pace that is more often than not, unprecedented.

It would seem that universities would be all the wiser to be continually supporting students to acquire employability and entrepreneurial skills in the most diverse ways possible. Universities today face enormous pressure to redesign curricula in response to the challenges of an ever-changing world. Learners must acquire the type of skills that are most sought after by employers and the university experience equips students with academic, employability, and entrepreneurial skills that will help them in unprecedented ways in the years to come. Hence, the PechaKucha experience conveys a strong message to students that they are in the right direction.

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