Blended learning: making an impact on assessment and self-reflection in accounting education

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution of a blended learning strategy in a company law course for accounting students and to evaluate its impact on assessment and student self-reflection.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study approach is used to describe the development of blended learning technologies within an elevator pitch assessment item in four cohorts over a two-year period. This is complemented by teacher observations, an online survey and student interviews to evaluate the assessment item, the technology used and its impact as a self-reflection and assessment tool.

Findings – The case study reveals the benefits of blended learning technologies but also a series of logistical, assessment-related, behavioural and technological issues and how these issues were addressed. The preliminary evidence from the online survey and student interviews suggests that the blended learning technologies have facilitated flexibility in assessment (both from a student and teacher perspective), student self-reflection and fairness in assessment practices.

Originality/value – The study identifies the benefits of and likely issues facing educators when considering the deployment of blended learning technologies to teach and assess oral communication skills. The paper contributes to pedagogy by describing the innovative use of video cameras in assessing elevator pitches and extends the literature on video presentations in higher education, in particular, its positive influence on student self-reflection.

Keywords Accounting education, Generic skills, Blended learning, Elevator pitch, Oral communication

Paper type Case study

Introduction

A priority for higher education is to develop students' technical as well as generic skills so that they can make a successful transition from university to the workplace (AC Nielsen Research Services, 2000; Precision Consultancy, 2007). Generic skills are also described as graduate, professional, transferable, work ready and employability in skills-based education (Barrie *et al.*, 2009). Industry and higher education bodies have attempted to articulate these skills. For example, in Australia, the 1992 ACCI/BCA project, *Employability Skills for the Future* identified eight employability skills: communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning, and technology (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Business Council of Australia, 2002). Transferability is a distinguishing feature of generic skills and an important reason for its demand by employers. Unlike technical knowledge, generic skills rarely become obsolete and they can be applied to a broader range of jobs, disciplines, careers and circumstances (Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008).

In the context of accounting education, employers have been critical of the tertiary focus on technical knowledge at the expense of generic skills such as oral communication (Albrecht and Sack, 2000; Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009). Accreditation bodies also require universities to include generic skills in the curriculum as part of a quality assurance framework in accounting education (AACSB, 2011; Institute of Chartered Accountants and CPA Australia, 2009). The assessment and teaching of oral communication skills represents a significant challenge to accounting educators. Accounting is a popular degree in Australia which is characterised by: large cohorts; an already crowded curriculum designed to meet the technical knowledge requirements of accreditation bodies; minimal contact hours (three hours per week); and a not insignificant number of international students whose first language is not English (ESL students). Using blended learning technologies may be the solution in supporting and facilitating teaching, learning and assessing oral communication skills in a way which does not compromise the time and resources allocated to teaching and assessing technical knowledge.

This paper is a case study of a blended learning strategy in company law, a second year undergraduate accounting course at an Australian university. Using an elevator pitch assessment item as the object of the study, the following research question is addressed:

RQ1. What is the impact of the blended learning strategy on student self-reflection and assessment?

The paper commences with a theoretical background to the impact of blended learning, with particular emphasis on video presentations in higher education. Drawing on the enterprise education literature, the authors outline the advantages of embedding the elevator pitch, an experiential learning tool, into course design. The role of self-reflection in self-regulated learning then follows. The next section describes the evolution of the blended learning strategy in four cohorts during a two-year period. This narrative provides a deep understanding of how and why the blended learning technologies were developed and how the authors addressed a number of logistical, assessment-related, behavioural and technological issues during its evolution. The technology is then evaluated, in particular its function as a reflective and assessment tool, using preliminary quantitative and qualitative data obtained through an online survey, staff observations and student interviews. The limitations of the study are considered and future research outlined, followed by concluding remarks.

Theoretical background
The impact of blended learning
There is no universally accepted definition of blended learning. Two reasons identified for the diverse number of blended learning definitions are: the relative infancy of research into blended learning (Adams *et al.*, 2009; Graham, 2006; Procter, 2003) and the development of different perceptions of blended learning depending upon its contextual setting (Garrison *et al.*, 2002; Mackay and Stockport, 2006; Hofmann, 2008). For example, Masie and Hall (2002) define blended learning, in a training and development context, as the use of two or more distinct methods of training. Conversely, a common meaning of blended learning used in the context of higher education studies is "a mix of traditional methods of teaching, such as face to face teaching and on-line teaching" (Bliuc *et al.*, 2007, p. 233).

The term, "blended learning" has also been criticised as misleading (Oliver and Trigwell, 2005) on the basis that the blending essentially refers to teaching, rather than learning. Oliver and Trigwell (2005) suggest that a more appropriate term for the concept would be "blended teaching" or "learning blended pedagogies". Despite Oliver and Trigwell's suggested need that blended learning refocus on the learner, rather than the instructor's perspective, Thorne (2003, p. 184) recognised the strategic importance of the "blend" when he defined blended learning as "a way of meeting the challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of individuals by integrating the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best traditional learning". Regardless of the ambiguity of the term "blended learning" (Hofmann, 2008) a common factor in a number of definitions, is the use of e-learning tools to support more classical learning approaches, such as classroom instruction or on-the-job training, where justification for such support is based on improved learning outcomes and/or cost and time savings (Hofmann, 2008). Given the educational setting of this case study, the following definition of blended learning by Krause (2007, p. 1) will be adopted for the purposes of this study:

> Blended learning is realised in teaching and learning environments where there is an effective integration of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning as a result of adopting a strategic and systematic approach to the use of technology combined with the best features of face to face interaction.

The benefits of using blended learning include: quality improvements in learning and teaching (Collis, 2003; Morgan, 2002), widening student participation (Bonk *et al.*, 2002), and meeting student expectations (Dziuban *et al.*, 2004). The first benefit, in particular, motivated the authors to develop and embed the blended learning strategy in company law.

Experiential learning
The elevator pitch is an experiential learning tool designed to improve accounting students' oral communication skills. Accounting students can learn and develop oral communication skills through the experiences of modelling, preparation, presentation and reflection associated with their elevator pitch. With its entrepreneurial context and focus on oral communication skills, the elevator pitch may also foster a specific group of generic skills – what enterprise educators describe as "enterprise skills". Currently enterprise education is experiencing growing global appeal (Johannisson, 1991; Doutriaux and Barker, 1996; Pittaway and Cope, 2007). The objective of enterprise education is to assist students develop the skills that "encourage them to be innovative, identify opportunities in the workplace and take control of their own lives" (Jones and Jones, 2011, p. 706). These enterprise skills (innovation, initiative and self-management) are examples of generic skills and require the application of other generic skills such as teamwork, leadership and communication (Jones and Jones, 2011; Pepin, 2012).

Research supports the acquisition of enterprise skills through experiential learning as entrepreneurs learn through doing and reflection (Rae and Carswell, 2000; Cope and Watts, 2000; Pepin, 2012). Simulated environments whereby students are given the opportunity to actively engage in and commit to the development of their own business proposition, to make decisions, and to invest emotionally in their business (Pittaway and Cope, 2007) facilitates experiential learning of enterprise skills. Jones and Jones (2011, p. 718) advocate that "undergraduate business programmes should include a practical 'real world' experience that provides a bridge between theoretical knowledge

and applied business skills" and do so by embedding an annual business planning competition within their business school's academic calendar to encourage entrepreneurial behaviour amongst its undergraduates. The elevator pitch, like the business plan, is an assessment item specific to the entrepreneurial context, thus addressing the need identified by Pittaway and Edwards (2012) for more innovative assessment practice unique to entrepreneurship education. An advantage of using the elevator pitch is its timing in the enterprise process and the importance oral communication skills play in making the pitch. In the very early stages of commercialising a venture, oral communication skills, specifically the use of visual symbols, speech and gestures in the elevator pitch are paramount to gaining and sustaining support for novel ventures by signalling to resource providers that the venture is legitimate and feasible (Clarke, 2011; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2012). In this respect the elevator pitch item can meet the needs of enterprise education assessment, identified by Edwards and Muir (2012, p. 287) "to be inclusive of personal issues of identity development, clearer linkage between theory and practice and critical reflection on practise".

Self-reflection in self-regulated learning
Like previous studies (De Grez *et al.*, 2009, 2012) the elevator pitch assessment adopts a socio-cognitive theoretical perspective towards self-regulated learning as the basis for teaching and developing oral presentation skills (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 2001). Existing literature links the instruction of oral presentation skills to observational learning (Bandura, 1997). A student's oral presentation skills will improve by observing the performance of "a good oral presentation", comparing this standard with the student's own performance and attempting to achieve a closer match between the good standard and the student's performance (Sadler, 1989). The likelihood of achieving a closer match or "closing the gap" is increased when feedback is provided (Winnie, 2004). Hattie notes the importance of the calibration of the gap as this "should inform the provision of feedback aimed at closing the gap" (Hattie, 2013). Such feedback may be provided by teaching staff, but may also include feedback provided through self-reflection (DeGrez *et al.*, 2012). An excellent source of feedback can be provided by watching one's own recorded oral presentation (Bourhis and Allen, 1998). Schunk (2001) also observed cognitive and behavioural change could be brought about by self-modelling: by observing one's own videotaped performance.

Self-reflection is the third critical phase of self-regulated learning, following on from forethought and performance (Schunk, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). Self-reflection involves evaluating the amount of time taken, effort expended, strategies and learning aids (Masui and De Corte, 2005) utilised in the performance of a particular skill. Such evaluation then influences further forethought and subsequent performances by the learner (Zimmerman, 1998). Jensen and Harris (1999) describe the benefits of self-reflection in terms of developing and assessing students' oral communication skills. By using a public speaking portfolio, they identify a three-step process of active reflection: identifying past/current experiences; perceiving the gap between past and future behaviour; and employing specific strategies to bridge this gap. Building on Jensen and Harris' public speaking portfolio, this study evaluates the effectiveness of using video presentations as a self-reflection tool by not only identifying students' past/current experiences, but also providing exemplars of elevator pitches, thereby assisting students to identify the gap between their performance and the model performance and to implement strategies to bridge the gap.

Video presentations in higher education
The role and use of video technology in higher education is evolving from a traditional passive function of information provider to an interactive tool that can improve oral communication skills. Such use is unlikely to abate given the ease with which videos can be prepared and viewed. Low cost digital video cameras are widely available and can record and upload videos to internet video repositories, such as YouTube, Facebook, TED and Vimeo, where they can be viewed by any number of persons using web-enabled devices such as desktops, laptops, tablets and smart-phones. Previous research, especially in teaching medicine (Roter *et al.*, 2004; Gagliano, 1988) provides evidence of using video presentations to enhance communication skills in simulated situations. In addition, role modelling is a recognised strength of video presentations and allows students a very ready means to reflect upon their performance (Burnard, 1991). Brown *et al.* (1997) considered the use of videos as the most effective means of improving student oral communication skills by providing: learning opportunities, guidance in analysing their presentations and opportunities to develop their own self-assessment skills. Videos are used in diverse disciplines such as art, humanities and sciences, as well as professional and vocational curricula (Kaufmann and Mohan, 2009). In accounting education, Holtzblatt and Tschakert (2011) recently reported on a student-created video project in which students were assigned one of a variety of International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) topics and had to create a video of five to 15 minutes duration, involving interviews with IFRS experts. A number of benefits were observed including improved online communication skills.

An examination of the impact of video technologies on oral communication skills generally is beyond the scope of this study. The sections which follow address the evolution of the blended learning technologies in the elevator pitch assessment item with the relevant examination focused on the technology itself and its ability to facilitate self-reflection and assessment practices.

Blended learning: evolution
Elevator pitch
Following a strategic review, company law, a second year undergraduate accounting course at an Australian university, was selected for the implementation of an oral communication assessment item at the beginning of 2011. The elevator pitch was the preferred vehicle for assessing accounting students' oral communication skills based on relevancy. The ability to pitch is a generic skill which can be used by graduates in a variety of business contexts (e.g. capital raising, job interviews, annual pay reviews, networking events) and it also relates to the regulation of promoters, a major topic covered in the company law curriculum. An active promoter is a person who takes steps in setting up a company – this includes raising capital. The elevator pitch takes its name from the scenario of being in an elevator with a potential investor. As well as being an innovative experiential learning tool, it is considered a strategic oral communication skill-building exercise because it combines two common and productive training activities: an individualised performance with role-playing activities (Smythe and Nikolai, 2002). The promoter has the duration of the elevator ride (30 seconds to a minute) to pitch a product, service, person or company ("the item") to that investor with the purpose being to attract the investor's attention and convince them the item is worth further and more detailed consideration.

The assessment item (weighting 10 per cent) required students to complete a three minute elevator pitch in which the student was placed in the role of a promoter.

The promoter's hypothetical client (an entity) wishes to raise capital from an investor to fund an item with the investor to become a substantial shareholder in the entity. A potential investor (known as a venture capitalist or "angel" investor) has agreed to listen to the presentation. Students were not required to create a new item as the purpose was to assess the quality of the students' oral communication skills, not the quality or future profitability of the item being promoted. The three-minute limit was selected for assessment reasons – teachers would not have the time to properly assess each of the oral communication criteria in a traditional one-minute elevator pitch. A summary of how the use of blended learning technologies evolved over the four cohorts is set out at Table I. The discussion which follows describes and examines the changes made to the blended learning strategy.

Cohort 1 (January-May 2011)
Students in Cohort 1 (49 students total; 11 ESL students) had to form a group of six, nominate their preferred times and dates of the presentation and develop an individual presentation. A one-hour timeslot was allocated for the six individual presentations with informal feedback provided by the teacher and students at the end of all the presentations. Students were assessed using a paper-based rubric. For each presentation, the teacher and the five non-presenting students represented the group of potential investors. The role of video technology at this first stage was generally passive with students receiving a variety of web links on their online course site within the university learning management system. Blended learning resources included web sites that: listed and described ideas, products, services and businesses that students could select to promote; provided tips on designing and delivering elevator pitches; had video footage of elevator pitches; and had expert feedback on completed elevator pitches. Whilst students appreciated the level of feedback provided by the teacher and colleagues, the whole exercise was resource intensive. With student-staff contact hours already committed to teaching and assessing principles of corporate governance, the teacher was required to assess the students outside contact hours. This would not be sustainable in a larger cohort.

The authors' response to this challenge was to have students prepare their own video presentations with additional technologies to support both teachers (assessment) and students (learning). The authors considered that this step would reduce the burden on staff resources and improve the integrity of the assessment. In particular, video recording would reduce staff workload associated with organising presentation times and being present to assess students during those times and provide a more efficient and objective method of assessing oral presentation skills. Staff could assess student presentations at a time convenient to them, could replay the presentation when finalising a grade and moderate assessment where multiple teachers were involved in assessing a cohort.

Cohort 2 (August-November 2011)
Students in Cohort 2 (135 students total; 49 ESL students) recorded the presentation using a university-supplied Sony Bloggie video camera outside class time. The cameras (model MHS-FS1) have an inbuilt USB arm which allows for direct connection to USB ports on PCs/Laptops dispensing with the need for separate USB cables. Accessories purchased for the camera included Joby Gorillapod flexible mini tripods, which can wrap around many surfaces including the shoulder of the person recording. Students formed groups of three, with each student taking turns as promoter, camera

Use of blended learning technology	Cohort 1 (n = 49)	Cohort 2 (n = 135)	Cohort 3 (n = 41)	Cohort 4 (n = 103)
Student presentation	No (face to face)	Yes (Sony Bloggie with tripods)	Sony Bloggie	Sony Bloggie
Presentation resources	Links to web sites providing tips, promotion items; and video footage of elevator pitches	Same as cohort 1 plus: "good" and "bad" teacher elevator pitches; booking and camera operating instructions	Same as Cohort 2 but with revised camera operating instructions	Same as Cohort 3 plus student exemplars
Room bookings for presentation	Manual (by teacher)	Online booking system	Online booking system	Manual (by teacher)
Student practice	No	No	No	Yes
Assessment and feedback	Paper based (8 criteria)	Electronic rubric (8 criteria) using ALEC	Electronic rubric (7 criteria) using ALEC	Same as Cohort 3 but with improved flexibility in ALEC
Reflection	Voluntary	Voluntary	Voluntary	Tied to formal assessment – students had to view own video presentation

Table I.
Evolution of blended learning strategy

operator and venture capitalist. The student as venture capitalist could ask the promoter scripted questions. Students collected a camera from the administration staff (who were responsible for the charging and distribution of the cameras), leaving their driver's licence or student ID card as security. Recording took place in pre-booked rooms, using electronic sign-up lists in the learning management system, with each group of students being allowed one hour to record, upload, make a copy of the recording for their own portfolios and delete the recordings from the camera before returning to the collection point. This provided students enough time to make two or more recordings and select their best one or alternatively start over again if they made a significant error during the recording. The presentation was then assessed using an electronic rubric comprising of eight criteria (introduction, content, organisation of presentation, voice, pace, visual aids, audience engagement and conclusion) with the teacher assigning a weighting to each criterion. The rubric results were then e-mailed to students. Two additional technologies introduced in Cohort 2 – Assurance of Learning Embedded in Courses (ALEC) and the "good" and "bad" teacher elevator pitches – are described below.

Marking using ALEC. ALEC is a custom built web application designed specifically for data collection for accreditation and assurance of learning purposes. It is a database-driven application and includes data on lecture and tutorial groups with associated enrolled students allowing teachers to use the application for assessing student assignments, which in this instance were uploaded video recordings.

The electronic rubric for company law was embedded in ALEC, replacing the paper-based rubric used in Cohort 1. It was attached to each student listed in ALEC with a pre-determined percentage assigned for each standard of performance (excellent: 100 per cent; very good: 84 per cent; good: 67 per cent; satisfactory: 50 per cent; unsatisfactory: 33 per cent or 0) and a weighting for each criterion. The paper-based instrument in Cohort 1 was time intensive in two respects. First, the teacher had to manually calculate the mark for each of the eight criteria themselves as well as the overall grade. Second, the paper-based rubric that the teacher used to make notes whilst listening to the student presentation was not the final rubric distributed to the student. Following the presentation, the teacher would take a second blank copy of the rubric to finalise their feedback and the grade.

The electronic rubric, in conjunction with ALEC, is the preferred assessment and feedback tool. The teacher clicks on the relevant standard of performance and can make additional comments for each criterion whilst viewing the presentation on a dual screen monitor. Once the teacher finalises the standard of performance for each criterion, the system automatically calculates the final mark. Student feedback reports attaching the rubric are batch e-mailed to the students and the numerical results downloaded for upload into an online grading system used by teachers to calculate final grades and for students to view their marks for each assessment item. An extract of the rubric for the criterion "organisation of presentation" is included in Table II.

"Good" and "bad" elevator pitches. An important addition to the supporting online resources for Cohort 2 was a professionally prepared video presentation of "good" and "bad" elevator pitches. Whilst students in Cohort 1 received video resources which provided examples of elevator pitches, they were not aligned to the parameters of the elevator pitch outlined in the assessment guidelines and they were not assessed against any formal criteria. For example, the vast majority of elevator pitches on video were between 60 and 90 seconds in length. Students preparing a three-minute elevator pitch in Cohort 1 experienced difficulty in organising and structuring their

Criteria	Excellent	Very good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Organisation of presentation (weighting 10%)	Presents information and ideas in a logical and interesting sequence which the audience can easily follow	Presents information and ideas in a logical sequence which the audience can follow	Presents information and ideas at a reasonable level of logical sequence which the audience finds difficult to follow at times	Presents information and ideas at a basic level of logical sequence which the audience generally finds difficult to follow	Presents information in a poorly developed and illogical sequence which the audience cannot follow

Table II.
Electronic rubric (extract)

presentations, despite the written assessment guidelines addressing this criterion. The authors wanted to provide an elevator pitch video resource which: clarified how teachers would apply each assessment criterion to an elevator pitch; made explicit standards of performance against the criteria; and provided examples of "good" and "bad" elevator pitches as a basis for modelling. Modelling can influence self-efficacy and academic performance by enabling students to observe the performance of others in a like situation (Bandura, 1997).

In the video resource, one of the authors made four pitches of their own business to an actor (the venture capitalist) in an actual elevator using an Ipad as a visual aid. A second author then provided audio commentary following the pitch to highlight the strengths and weaknesses with reference to the assessment criteria. The "bad" elevator pitches are characterised by: poor preparation; not maintaining investor engagement; and lack of confidence. The "good" elevator pitch reveals behaviours for the students to role model and the "bad" elevator pitches, behaviour to avoid when presenting their elevator pitch.

Cohort 3 (January-April 2012)
Cohort 3 comprised of 41 students (eight ESL students). Two main changes were made to the elevator pitch assessment following a review of Cohort 2: the removal of visual aids as an assessment criterion and additional instructions on the recording of presentations. Visual aids were removed as an assessment criterion for two reasons: visual aids are not a common feature of elevator pitches; and the difficulty of viewing (and therefore properly assessing) visual aids in the video presentations. Nevertheless students were not discouraged from using visual aids as they could be used to support the criterion "audience engagement", but they were not compulsory. Whilst it was pleasing that students had viewed the "good" and "bad" elevator pitch resource, some misunderstood its modelling function by plagiarising parts of the good elevator pitch and/or video recording the presentation "side on" like the online resource, which made it difficult for the teacher to assess the "audience engagement" criterion. A diagram (in addition to the original text instructions) was added to the recording instructions to ensure that the promoter student was recorded facing the camera (i.e. "front on") with the camera operator being behind the potential investor's left or right shoulder.

Cohort 4 (August-November 2012)
A review of Cohorts 2 and 3 revealed a number of technological, behavioural and logistical issues. Logistically some rooms that had been pre-booked for presentations were not suitable in terms of audio-visual quality, noise and light. The online booking system had technical problems such as the double booking of rooms and students being prevented from booking rooms that were available. Students also found that uploading presentations using their own web-enabled devices such as laptops through the university wireless system was particularly slow. This meant that students had fewer opportunities to deliver multiple elevator pitches and select their best one. Finally the clarity in recording the presentations produced peculiar student behaviours. For example, students placed notes in large font directly behind the camera or placed their elevator pitch "script" on overhead projectors behind the camera using the available audio-visual facilities in the room. On further investigation, students adopted this practice because the assessment criteria did not prohibit it and/or it ensured that the students' over reliance on notes was not captured on camera. Nevertheless the practice was easily detected by the teacher

because the student presentations were clearly scripted, students looking up and away from the potential investor during substantial parts of the presentation. This negatively affected student performance with respect to the criteria "content knowledge" and "audience engagement".

The fourth iteration of the elevator pitch assessment (103 students total; 44 ESL students) implemented a number of changes including:

- One suitable staff office, which had no audio-visual facilities other than a computer connected to the university network, was booked for one day per week over a six-week period. Students were asked to upload their presentation using the computer. This ensured almost instantaneous uploading of presentations.

- Students could borrow a Sony Bloggie camera to practice before their presentation. This was identified as an issue during student interviews, particularly from mature age respondents, who said that they would have liked to familiarise themselves with the device because they did not feel as technologically savvy as their younger counterparts.

- The composition of the group now being a camera operator, observer and promoter. Students were required to treat the lens of the camera, not one of their colleagues, as the "eye" of the potential investor. This was designed to deter students from relying on notes behind the camera. The observer or camera operator could ask the promoter questions as if they were the potential investor, but the promoters' focus was to remain on the camera.

- A new version of ALEC with improved functionality (refer Cohort 2). The original grading structure in which there was a pre-determined percentage for each standard of performance was replaced by a slider tool which enabled the teacher to assign their own percentage for each criterion. This allowed for greater flexibility (and fairness) in assessment practices. Further, the process of e-mailing student feedback reports, downloading results and producing a graphical representation of the data, previously necessitating an e-mail request to support staff, was now a mouse click for users.

- Students were required to review and reflect on their video presentation as part of a tutorial exercise which was formally assessed. It was noted during the interviews of Cohorts 2 and 3 that some of the "better" students had not reviewed their videos. In particular, students were asked to refer to the completed assessment criteria e-mailed to them and answer these questions: "what were the best aspects of your presentation and why?"; "what aspects are in need of improvement and why?" and "How will you address these aspects in future presentations?"

- Four video presentations by students from different demographic backgrounds were added to the online course site as student exemplars of excellent presentations. Some Cohort 4 students used these exemplars as a benchmark for assessing their performance and they will be included in the presentation resources for future cohorts.

Blended learning: impact
An online survey of the blended learning technologies (36 respondents) using a five-point Likert scale was conducted on Cohort 2. The online survey did not contain

demographic questions. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a selection of students from Cohorts 2 and 3 (ten respondents total; two ESL students) who responded to an e-mail invitation at the end of the semester. Interview questions included the best aspects and aspects of the assessment item in need of improvement and questions addressing self-reflection: "Did you review your video presentation afterwards? Was that helpful? Why?" The summary survey results (Table III) and qualitative data suggest that the video presentation strategy had a positive impact in terms of reflection and assessment.

Self-reflection and assessment: student perspective
Students found that making and uploading the video was a simple process with almost 90 per cent of respondents to the survey agreeing that the "Sony Bloggie was easy to use" and that "uploading the video presentation was easy". Further, 94 per cent of respondents agreed that the online instructions were simple to follow. The staff-prepared video presentations of "good" and "bad" elevator pitches assisted students in organising and designing engaging presentations. One student noted that: "background things that you provided were extremely helpful. I think if I had to do that task without your sample version and the other web site and things you provided I would have been very lost".

Students were less anxious with completing a video presentation within their self-selected groups than in front of a large class (80 per cent of respondents to the survey). Students repeatedly mentioned this as the best aspect of the assessment item: "I'm happy to speak at any time, but I get very nervous doing a prepared speech, I found it a lot easier to do it in the video presentation". Students also appreciated the flexibility of completing the assessment item outside formal classes and that they had time, during their one hour group timeslot, to start the presentation again or pick their best presentation from multiple recordings: "I like the idea it was filmed, rather than in front of the class only because if you stuffed up you could start again. Even though we only had so much time, but you still had time to go 'oh, I can just start that again'".

Most importantly, students have utilised their copy of the presentation as a reflective learning tool, with 80 per cent of students agreeing that "watching my presentation was useful". This was revealed during interviews:

- It made me more self-aware of the way that I kind of communicate […] I thought I would sound quite natural in front of people but watching the video back I didn't feel that I was natural at all. I felt I was a bit scripted.

- I did find in one of my presentations that I went a little overboard with the body language

- You were able to sort of critique yourself, know where you have got issues and where you can improve […]

Comment	Agreed/strongly agreed ($n = 36$) (%)
Sony Bloggie (video camera) was easy to use	88
Uploading of video presentation was easy	89
Online instructions simple to follow	94
Less anxiety recording than presenting live	80
Would have preferred to use own (video camera) device	14
Appreciated completing the video outside formal classes	85
Watching my presentation was useful	80

Table III.
Blended learning
technology survey

• I picked up some things […] sometimes I slur when I talk and I spoke too fast
  […]. It was a good experience to see how we presented and what sort of eye
  contact I had with the camera.

• I could see exactly what I didn't do […] I looked nervous and withdrawn […]
  sometimes you think you are being expressive and you think you are doing this
  and that and you realise that it is not the case.

The electronic rubric and feedback, used in conjunction with the video presentation,
provided another dimension to self-reflected learning. The completed rubric e-mailed to
the students highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of students' oral communication
skills with reference to the standards of performance for each criterion. Students then
had the ability to compare their own performance recorded on video with the completed
rubric with a view to recognising those specific behaviours to be adopted or avoided to
improve future presentations. By having a copy of the presentation and completed
rubric, students could better appreciate why they received their mark: "I could see
exactly the way that marking criteria thing came with it, I could see exactly where
I didn't do well […] I thought the marking was very kind but very honest too, you know
I could see that, yes I've done not as well there and they were very fair marks". This is an
important factor which promotes fairness and transparency in assessment.

Assessment: institution perspective
From an institution perspective, teaching staff have enjoyed the flexibility that blended
learning technologies offer. In particular, teachers were able to assess students'
presentations at a convenient time and location by accessing the student's file on the
university server. Teachers with dual monitor access could view the student's
presentation on one monitor and then assess the presentation using the electronic
rubric displayed on the other monitor. Technology not only facilitated greater
efficiency in assessment, but consistency, in that it enabled one teacher to mark all of
the presentations over a short space of time. Like the students, video presentations also
gave the teacher an opportunity to self-reflect. The teacher could view the presentation
more than once to ensure the student's grade was fair and accurately represented their
standard of performance. Fairness in assessment practices was also promoted by
enabling students who were concerned with their mark to review the rubric and video
presentation with their teacher and for the teacher to provide further constructive
feedback about their presentation.

In summary, the survey, interviews and the authors' own experiences during
the evolution of the elevator pitch assessment provide preliminary evidence that the
blended learning strategy has had a positive impact on self-reflection and assessment.
From a student perspective the "good" and "bad" elevator pitch resource: assisted
students in structuring their presentation; the video format reduced their anxiety in
making presentations (which may otherwise have affected academic performance and self-
efficacy) and it gave students the flexibility in terms of presenting outside scheduled class
times and selecting their "best presentation" from multiple recordings. The subsequent
viewing by students of their presentation promoted self-reflection. In particular, it enabled
students to identify aspects of their oral communications skills that require improvement
and clarify misconceptions about their oral communication skills. The completed
electronic rubric e-mailed to the students enhanced both self-reflection and transparency in
assessment. Students could compare their presentation against the rubric mark for each
criterion and teacher comments to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to assess

the fairness of the final result. From an institution perspective, teachers have appreciated the flexibility of assessing a video presentation and the efficiency in assessment using an electronic rubric that automatically calculates grades and enables the teacher to finalise comments and standards of performance whilst viewing the video presentation. The blended learning resources available on the university learning management system (particularly the video resource of "good" and "bad" elevator pitches) also reduced class time spent in discussing the elevator pitch assessment. The video recording promoted consistency and fairness in assessment by enabling the teacher to review the presentation on multiple occasions before finalising a grade. It also provided documentary evidence for reviewing a grade should it be challenged by the student. In fact no student challenged their mark in any of the Cohorts 2, 3 or 4 which may be attributable to the transparency of the assessment facilitated by blended learning technologies.

Elevator pitch: tertiary response and future applications
The tertiary response to the elevator pitch assessment item has been generally positive, with academics of diverse disciplines attending presentations on the topic recognising the potential for technology to improve assessment practices in general and specifically the elevator pitch to assess oral communication skills in their own classes. In fact, two academics have adopted the authors' blended learning strategy: in a financial planning course and in a management course in 2012. The demonstrated capacity of the video presentation and electronic rubric to serve as a reflective tool has also encouraged the authors to expand the assessment in 2013 to include a 5 per cent component for self-assessment, meaning the assessment is worth 15 per cent of the overall grade for company law. Students will attend a face-to-face self-assessment workshop during their first week of study with supporting online materials. Students will then be given 90 minutes to complete their presentations. Following each presentation, the two non-presenting students will assess the student promoter with reference to the assessment criteria and provide feedback, with this part of the session to be recorded by the promoter student. It is considered that this strategy will increase students' understanding of oral communication skills and the credibility of the video presentation assessment.

Limitations and future research
The primary limitations of this study include the small sample size for the online survey, the lack of demographic information associated with the sample, the preliminary nature of the evidence and the short-time frame of the analysis. For example, what were the ESL student perceptions of the elevator pitch assessment item when compared to the non-ESL students in the cohort? These shortcomings will be addressed in future research currently being conducted by the authors. Students from Cohorts 2, 3 and 4 have completed a pre and post-presentation survey measuring student self-efficacy and oral communication skills. The purpose of the study will be to measure the impact of the elevator pitch assessment item on these variables and provide additional qualitative data on the positive and negative aspects of the assessment. Further research could also entail other teachers utilising the assessment item and/or blended learning technologies and reporting on its impact in terms of oral communication skills; other generic or enterprise skills such as teamwork or leadership; student self-reflection and self-efficacy.

Conclusion
This paper describes and evaluates the application of a comprehensive blended learning strategy to an oral communication assessment item. The authors consider

that such a detailed description is of value to teachers who may wish to implement the assessment item and/or one or more of the technologies described in this paper. The evolution of the blended learning strategy, as viewed through the lens of four cohorts, has revealed the benefits of blended learning technologies, but also a series of logistical, assessment-related, behavioural and technological issues that need to be addressed. The preliminary evidence from the online survey, student interviews and the authors' own experience demonstrates that the blended learning technologies has had a positive impact on flexibility in assessment (both from a student and teacher perspective), student self-reflection and fairness and efficiency in assessment practices. In particular, the video resources assisted students in structuring their presentation through modelling and the video format reduced their presentation anxiety. The video presentation and electronic rubric combined to facilitate student self-reflection concerning their oral communication skills. For teachers, the blended learning strategy supported the teaching, learning and assessment of oral communication skills in a way which did not compromise the time and resources allocated to teaching and assessing technical knowledge. The blended learning resources available on the university learning management system minimised the in-class time spent discussing the assessment item and the video presentations removed the additional burden in Cohort 1 of assessing students on campus outside normal class times. The combination of the electronic rubric and video presentation format also reduced the time spent in assessing the student and enabled the teacher to conduct multiple reviews of the elevator pitch which promoted fairness in assessment practices. For teachers faced with the challenge of assessing oral communication for accreditation and/or assurance of learning purposes in a resource-constrained environment, the elevator pitch assessment item and associated technologies demand further consideration.

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