

Let's Talk: The Case for Oral Exams

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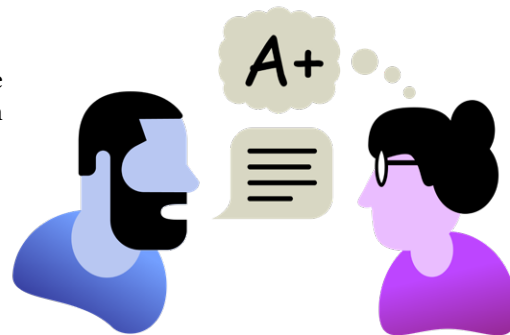
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Where we are

Wax nostalgically about the days before personal computers or smartphones in classrooms and you can almost hear the collective eye rolls. Higher education existed without the use of technology longer than it has with it. The University of Bologna, founded in 1088, is credited with being the world's oldest university in the western world; Drexel University is credited as being the first university to require each student to have a personal computer in the early 1980s. If my recollection of math, tested only via written exams, serves me, the US has had about 40 years with personal technology-aided education and the world has about 940 years without. With the increase in use of artificial intelligence (AI) in education, maybe it is time to consider other options for teaching and assessment and look back to the first 900 years of education to rediscover these methods.

The centuries-old concept of "While we teach, we learn," (Seneca the Younger) espouses that it is only content that we can teach to others that is demonstrative of our own mastery of the subject. Many students learn best by verbally explaining concepts, answering questions, and debating concepts. Oral examinations are used throughout the world, even for students who are not defending a doctoral dissertation. When I worked in the Slovak Republic as an English teacher in the



late 90s, oral exams of all subjects were (and still are) required to graduate. It was immediately evident which students had a mastery of the English language, and those who had memorized vocabulary but were stymied when the conversation twisted and turned beyond what was explicitly taught in class.

"I do think that it takes a deeper level of understanding to explain something to someone else," says Dr. Emily Riehl, Professor of Mathematics, who was recently challenged to explain infinity to five different people: a child, a teen, a college student, a grad student, and an expert via the website for *Wired* magazine. "This is largely why I find oral exams so valuable. It's instantly clear whether the student understands what they are saying (at least in mathematics). I also find it much more of a humane experience. It's a wonderful way to end a semester course, to have a conversation with everyone one-on-one."

What are oral exams

Oral exams or assessments, where an instructor asks students questions one-on-one, have been the staple of law schools and doctoral dissertation defenses. This article focuses on employing oral assessments in undergraduate and graduate classes, either as the culminating assessment for the semester or regular checks for understanding throughout the term. The assessment option is even more nuanced than oral versus written assessments. Do oral assessments replace or complement other assessment forms? Should students be given the

option of one form of assessment vs. another? Each instructor can consider the goals for the course as well as the needs of the students.

What are the concerns

Time constraints

Class size is usually the first challenge when it comes to the implementation of oral exams because these assessments cannot be administered en masse. Anecdotally, a typical oral assessment takes about 20 minutes which can be a daunting challenge for large classes.

Student anxiety

Student anxiety should be recognized if you plan to require oral assessments. As with many courses, having just one final culminating exam can be very intimidating for students, so it might benefit the students to have several oral assessments throughout the term to practice their skills. Students may require other accommodations for an oral assessment, as they would for other types of assessments such as additional time or alternative options. Oral exams also have another advantage for students; making a safe space for the students to answer questions orally gives them practice for future challenges such as being interviewed for a job, taking graduate school courses, or presenting at conferences.

“On the question of student anxiety, I always emphasize that I’m not primarily interested in evaluating how well or polished students speak,” says Allon Brann, Instructional Designer and History instructor. “That is, I’m not looking for how fast they are, whether they say “umm,” or whether they can speak without any errors. Instead, I encourage them to correct themselves because I’m looking more at the substance of their explanation or argument.”

Things to consider

Provide questions in advance

“I think it’s good practice to give students the questions in advance, so they aren’t caught off guard; I do try to surprise everyone with a follow-up and set

The final will take the form of an oral exam to be scheduled at a mutually agreed-upon time after the final class meeting and at the latest on the morning of December 17th, the scheduled exam date. During the oral final, which will take place in my office, I will ask each student to answer questions drawn from a list that I will post in advance. No notes can be used during the exam. While the particular questions I ask may vary from student to student, there will be no surprises in the sense that the possible exam topics will be known in advance with enough time to prepare solutions.

Dr. Riehl’s Oral Exam Description from her syllabus

expectations that they can do well without getting everything perfectly right,” says Dr. Riehl. “It’s very normal in mathematics to not know the answer to something, and part of the structure of the exam is to normalize that experience.”

Yes or no to notes?

Some instructors prefer students to come to the oral assessment without notes, and others allow students to bring them. “Something else I encourage people to think about: what kind of notes (if any) do we want students to bring?” says Brann. “I think instructors assume that an oral exam must involve memorization, and therefore never any written or visual guides; it depends on what we’re asking of the students.” Brann gives two examples. Basic comprehension questions about course readings and lectures might be better served without notes. For the second example, for demonstrating analytical skills or defending an argument, it might be more beneficial to allow students to have notes.

Practice with peers

Some instructors pair or group students and provide guiding questions, so the students can practice with peers. They’re provided the same rubric that an instructor may use and provide constructive critiques to each other. These assessments can be graded, providing a low-risk, low-point opportunity for students to hone their skills

Reflect on the experience with the students

Anecdotally, students benefit from the one-on-one time with their instructor, even if they find the preparation stressful. Dr. Molly Worthen, a historian at the University of North Carolina, wrote in her *New York Times* article that she encouraged students to record the oral exam and complete a self-assessment. “The most empowering thing a teacher can do for her students has nothing to do with constant surveillance of their academic engagement, fancy classroom technology or a syllabus that caters to the latest trends. It is to simply talk with them, face to face, as fellow thinkers,” writes Dr. Worthen.

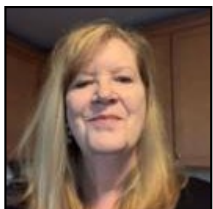
Additional Resources

- Worthen, M. (2022, December 12). If It Was Good Enough for Socrates, It’s Good Enough for Sophomores. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/02/opinion/college-oral-exam.html>
- Mintz, S. (2022, December 7). How to combat the High Schoolization of the university: Inside higher ed. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved February 8, 2023, from <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/how-combat-high-schoolization-university>
- Riehl, E. (2023, January 30). Mathematician explains infinity in 5 levels of difficulty. *Wired*. Retrieved February 14, 2023, from <https://www.wired.com/video/watch/mathematician-explains-infinity-in-5-levels-of-difficulty>

Author’s Background

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Mary Talalay is a Sr. Instructional Designer with the Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation (CTEI) and has worked at Johns Hopkins University for 23 years. She is an alumna of Johns Hopkins School of Public Health (MPH), University of Pennsylvania (MS), and Temple University (BA). She is an active volunteer with MD SPCA and TRU Rescue, fostering more than 200 pets in the past 10 years, as well as being an Audubon Ambassador, helping area residents plant native gardens. She is an avid kayaker and photographer.