A short guide to oral assessment

By Gordon Joughin

leeds metropolitan university

University of Wollongong

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Introduction

'Oral assessment' includes any assessment of student learning that is conducted, wholly or in part, by word of mouth. Oral assessment in its many forms has a long history. It dominated assessment up until at least the 18th century at Oxford and Cambridge (Stray, 2001) and continues to be a principal mode of assessment in many European countries. Elsewhere, and certainly in the UK and Australia, oral assessment is ubiquitous:

- Law students take part in mock court hearings
- Nursing students, along with students of other health professions, take part in 'OSCEs' (Objective Structured Clinical Examinations) where they are presented with a series of 'patients' and discuss diagnoses and treatment plans with an examiner
- Students preparing for a range of careers engage in assessed field practice, ranging from student teachers taking classes to Psychology students interviewing actual clients and marine biologists reporting on field work
- Students in almost all disciplines conduct oral presentations to their classes, individually or in teams
- The doctoral viva continues as an important rite of passage in most universities.

In any given university, this list could be multiplied many times over. If you are not using some form of oral assessment yourself, you are likely to find colleagues within your own university or elsewhere in your discipline who are. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that oral forms of assessment are as important now as they ever were:

- Universities worldwide are being called on to develop in their graduates those abilities that are central to the world of work and professional practice, a world where oral communication tends to dominate.
- Many theories of learning emphasise the importance of students' articulating their ideas, exposing their thinking to peers and teachers through speaking, and developing their ability and confidence to communicate in work-like environments.
- At a time of continuing concern for academic integrity, oral assessment helps us to be confident that the work presented by students is indeed their own.

So there are many reasons for coming to grips with oral assessment, for discussing it with colleagues, for sharing our current knowledge and practices, and for doing more of it! Of course, this is not to denigrate written assessment – merely to argue for a balanced diet of the most appropriate assessment methods for our students.

About this guide

This guide to oral assessment deals with any assessment based on the spoken word, including vivas, oral presentations, and a host of other forms of assessment. It is designed to be of use to anyone currently using oral assessment to make judgments about their students' learning, and anyone considering introducing oral assessment into their courses. It is not about assessing students' language or communication skills *per se*, but it is about assessment that calls on students to use the spoken word to express their knowledge and understanding.

In this guide we will be considering:

- the nature of oral assessment
- the advantages (and some disadvantages) of oral assessment
- key dimensions of oral assessment to use in planning oral assessments
- marking and grading
- preparing students for oral assessment; and
- ensuring that judgments based on oral assessment are sound, reliable and fair.

The guide will cite a number of articles where different forms of oral assessment are described. Most of these are the work of higher education teachers from various disciplines (rather than of educational researchers or theorists) and provide practical illustrations of how oral assessment can be carried out.

Despite the metaphor of a balanced assessment diet, this guide will not provide a recipe for designing and implementing oral assessment, but it will introduce a range of ingredients to use in various combinations in developing assessment tasks, and practices that will help you and your students make the most of the oral medium.

What is oral assessment?

Oral assessment refers to any assessment of student learning that is conducted by the spoken word. Many modes of communication can be used in assessment. Writing is no doubt the most common, with essays, tutorial papers, laboratory reports and written examinations dominating traditional assessment. Online text communication may be a significant recent variation on the written mode. Some assessment, especially in areas such as the creative arts, relies on the direct observation of a student's performance or other creative work. Oral assessment stands in contrast to these modes of assessment, though often supplementing them.

Assessment can be exclusively oral, or, as is frequently the case, can be combined with other modes of communication, depending on the nature of the assessment task. What makes the assessment 'oral' is that at least part of the assessment, and part of what counts towards a student's mark or grade, depends on what the student communicates by word of mouth.

Of course, it is not only the student who speaks. Oral assessment may involve an assessor or assessors posing questions orally, with varying degrees of spoken interaction as the assessment proceeds. Moreover, others may be involved in the assessment – the Nursing student interviewing a patient while his or her preceptor looks on; the Law student mooting in front of a barrister in the role of a judge; or peers who are responding to a seminar presentation.

Oral assessment includes a wide range of types. Most academics are familiar with the doctoral viva, which for many epitomises oral assessment, but there are many other forms, including:

- *presentations*, including the in-class presentation on a prepared topic and the group project report to the class
- *interrogations*, including the viva within undergraduate or graduate coursework in which the student is quizzed by one or more examiners, and the short interview of students to confirm their authorship of a written paper; and
- *applications*, such as the 'OSCE' (Objective Structured Clinical Examination) in Nursing or Medicine where the student moves from one simulated patient to another and is questioned about diagnoses and recommended action.

One form of oral assessment not included in this guide is the assessment of language skills, whether in the context of learning a foreign language or as part of the development of oral communication competencies. This guide is not concerned with the use of oral assessment to gauge students' language or communication skills *per se*. Its focus is on the use of oral processes to judge knowledge, understanding, problem solving and other abilities through the oral medium, not mastery of the oral medium itself.

In a final-year Marketing subject at the University of Western Sydney in Australia, students undergo a 20-minute viva with a pair of examiners – a teacher from their course and an industry consultant. Each student is asked a set of four questions from one of 14 topics and has to apply what he or she has learnt to a scenario. Marking uses a Likert-type scale across 12 criteria: appearance; knowledge of the subject; confidence; conciseness of responses; quality of responses; thinking on the spot; communication skills; application of theory to practice; ability to handle questions; body language; professional manner; and clarity of responses (Pearce & Lee, 2009).

Students in the UK Centre for Events Management at Leeds Metropolitan University have to portray visually a storyboard of all the activities necessary to put on an event. The students are in study groups of three, and different questions are asked of the students for the assessment: others in the group cannot support their colleagues while they are being questioned. This puts the onus on all group members to 'teach' and explain all of the work clearly to each other, so that any member of the trio can respond to the tutor. They can also practise mock questions with each other, developing a better ability to judge quality – an essential skill for their future careers.

Geography students at Oxford Brookes University report their fieldwork findings in group presentations to a mock weekend conference. Each group presents and discusses its findings as well as acting as discussants for another group and providing that group with evaluative feedback using a peer assessment feedback sheet. This enquiry and reporting format was designed to heighten students' engagement in the fieldwork itself while developing groupwork and presentation skills (Haigh & Gold, 1993).

Master of Science students at Göteborg University, Sweden, work in groups on a problem-solving activity, write a group report, and present their work in a day-long series of presentations. Each group also considers another group's report and questions that group following their presentation. Pairs of students are then questioned by an individual examiner about their work (Wistedt, 1998).

Why assess orally?

There are many reasons for choosing to assess our students orally. Here are seven commonly used reasons for opting for oral assessment, either on its own or in combination with other modes of assessment.

Seven reasons for using oral assessment

1. The learning outcomes demand it
2. It allows probing of the students' knowledge
3. It reflects the world of practice
4. It improves learning
5. It suits some students
6. The meaning of questions can be clarified
7. It helps to ensure academic integrity

1. It is the best way to assess particular learning outcomes or abilities

While oral assessment can be applied to almost any kind of learning outcome, it seems to be particularly useful in relation to students' applied problem-solving abilities, where they need to apply what they know to more-or-less complex scenarios. In such contexts, oral assessment can provide insight into students' cognitive processes. Where the assessment involves students interacting with others, including with real or role-playing clients or patients, the assessment also allows judgments about students' interpersonal competence. With or without clients, the assessment can be used to assess intrapersonal qualities such as confidence, self-awareness and aspects of 'professionalism' that may not be evidenced in other modes of assessment.

In an Occupational Therapy course, vivas are used both to develop and assess essential practice skills, including solving clinical problems, defending professional decisions, articulating rationales for interventions, developing and communicating innovative ideas – through being assessed and participating as assessors during presentations (Mackenzie, 2000).

2. It allows probing of the depth and extent of students' knowledge

One of the most important characteristics of most forms of oral assessment is that follow-up questions can be used to determine the limits of what the student knows. Unlike a written exam, assessors can ask the student to elaborate on an answer and can use a series of carefully graduated questions or probes until they have reached the limit of what the student knows. Assessors often express surprise at how well their students perform in oral assessments – it may be that oral assessment can be particularly good for probing the upper limits of a student's knowledge, though it may also be that students often prepare better for this kind of assessment.

3. It reflects the world of practice

'Practice' includes both the fields of professional practice such as law, teaching or nursing for which our students are preparing, as well as

less clearly defined fields of work for which their university studies are preparing them. Most fields of practice are dominated by talking rather than writing – listening and responding as a client discusses his or her needs; explaining a course of treatment to a patient; teaching a class of students. Such talk tends to be 'embodied', incorporating knowledge, skills, feelings and beliefs in action, so that assessment facilitates judgments about the student's integrated learning.

"Being able to speak intelligently about economics is as important as being able to write about it. In fact, speaking ability may be more useful for students because they are more likely to have to speak about economic issues than write about them."

(Walstad, 2001, p. 286)

4. It improves the quality of student learning

Oral assessment can promote learning in several ways:

- Students who anticipate being asked questions that they cannot predict conclude that the best way to handle this situation is to develop a thorough understanding of what they are studying
- Students may prepare particularly thoroughly in order to avoid seeming foolish in front of their examiner or their peers
- Some students seem reluctant to voice ideas that they do not 'own', that is, they want to ensure that they have a genuine understanding of what they are saying.

"You prepare yourself better because you've got the added stress of like you're in front of someone. So because you know you've got to do that you try to make sure. You're not just sitting in an exam room anonymously."

(Law student, Joughin, 1999, p. 153)

5. It suits some students

Some students may be better able to express themselves orally than in writing, while others may have particular difficulties with writing owing to dyslexia, impaired vision or other factors. Yet other students may have a particular wish or need to develop their ability to communicate about their discipline orally, knowing that this will be of benefit to them when they enter the workforce.

6. Unclear or ambiguous questions can be re-expressed or immediately clarified

Written examinations are based on an assumption that the written word is unambiguous and readily understood, in the way it was intended, by all students. This may often not be the case. Oral assessment provides the opportunity to ensure that each student understands the questions being asked.

7. It guarantees the work is the student's own

When students are not able to rely on written work, or when they are subjected to questions and probing of their understanding, they must rely on their own work, and their own words, thereby reducing the likelihood of plagiarism.

Some disadvantages of oral assessment

- *Undue anxiety.* Some anxiety can be beneficial in oral assessment, but anxiety that interferes with a student's performance will not give a true indication of his or her ability. Anxiety may be a special impediment for students with particular mental health problems. Practising presentations in class and providing rehearsals for vivas may help. Sometimes a student who experiences undue anxiety may need to be accommodated through alternative arrangements for their assessment.
- *Hearing or speech difficulties.* Students with hearing or speech impairments may also require some adjustment to the assessment process.
- *Time.* Oral assessment can be time-consuming, which becomes particularly problematic with larger classes. On the other hand, many forms of oral assessment can be quite short, and marking can occur very quickly at the end of the assessment. For example, Roberts describes a Geography viva which takes 10–15 minutes per candidate, including paperwork (Roberts, n.d.).
- *Lack of anonymity.* Examiners inevitably know whom they are examining.
- *Bias.* Concerns are sometimes expressed that examiners may be influenced by students' dress, gender, ethnicity or educational background.
- *Novelty.* The form of oral assessment being used may be unfamiliar to the student.
- *Recording.* Many universities, and good practice, require us to keep a record of the assessment for future reference in case of appeal. Making and storing audio or video recordings can be difficult to arrange.
- *Articulateness vs knowledge.* Examiners can mistake a student's articulateness for knowledge.

"Any well-planned examination ... is costly in terms of examiners' time and effort. The challenge is finding assessment instruments where the effort spent is educationally 'profitable'."

(Davis & Karunathilake, 2005, p. 294)

What is special about oral assessment?

Of course, what is unique about oral assessment is that it is oral! But what does this mean? And does it matter?

"Talking and writing are two very different modes of communication that mediate the world differently."
(Schoultz, Säljö & Wyndhamn, 2001, p. 213)

Is the spoken word different?

If we think of oral assessment as another set of assessment formats and types, we have already extended our repertoire of assessment methods in a most useful way since we have opened the way to probing our students' understanding; to examining abilities such as thinking on one's feet that are difficult to do through written means; and to assessing the ability to apply knowledge to the world of practice. Moreover, we have seen that oral assessment lends itself to the assessment of different kinds of content; can utilise interaction between student and examiner/s; requires students to process their ideas for an audience; and may use multiple modes of communication to support the oral component of the assessment. These are all what might be termed 'affordances' of oral assessment – the possibilities that arise from using the spoken word.

But what about the spoken word itself? Does speech possess some inherent qualities that are not present in writing and that may give oral assessment some unique advantages over written forms of assessment?

Dr Alan Wildeman, President of the University of Windsor in Canada, sees oral assessment as providing powerful 'moments of articulation' when the student is able to express his or her knowledge in a relationship with a trusted senior member of the discipline they are studying (private communication). Kehm expresses this as the advantage of "unrestrained talk between one person and another" (2001, p. 27).

Plato famously argued for the superiority of the spoken to the written word: writing would destroy the need for memory; students would receive information but without proper instruction and would therefore appear to be knowledgeable while in fact being quite ignorant. On the other hand, the spoken word "is written on the soul of the hearer with understanding", and the written word is only a pale shadow of "the living and animate speech of a man with knowledge" (*Phaedrus*, p. 98). Two-and-a-half millennia later, Kehm would describe one of the strengths of oral assessment as its ability "to distinguish superficial from real knowledge through in-depth questioning" (Kehm, 2001, p. 27).

"The psychodynamics of orality"

Walter Ong pioneered the study of the transition from oral to written societies, then looked at the differences between writing and speaking in the contemporary world (Ong, 2002). Some of his conclusions may provide insight into the power of oral assessment to influence students and their learning:

- In oral cultures, people identify themselves with their words, whereas writing has the effect of 'separating the knower from the known'. In my own research, many students have expressed a strong association with the words they use in oral presentations: "I own the words I speak more than I own the words that I write" (Joughin, 2008, p. 107).
- The spoken word is associated with power and action: "When you're giving a presentation as opposed to an assignment, often the words when spoken verbally have a lot more force than they do when written down in an assignment" (ibid).
- The spoken word is combative and polemical (Ong uses the word 'agonistic' from Greek athletic contests): one student said of the oral presentations and discussion that "it really does become a battle". Learning is often most effective when students see the need to argue a case rather than simply reiterate what is known.
- The presence of an audience is real when the word is spoken, whereas students have to imagine the audience for their written work. Students who are most galvanised by oral assessment report a strong sense of their audience. "In an exam you're just a number but the [presentation] is personalized and you're in direct contact with the people who assess you" (Joughin, 1999, p. 152).

"I think I need a better understanding of it if I'm going to then present rather than write it and hand it in and that's the end of the story. I think that extra step of presenting it really makes you understand it even more."

(Theology student, Joughin, 2008)

"It is important to know your stuff otherwise the viva could be your worst enemy."

(Marketing student, Pearce & Lee, 2009, p. 126)

"In the UK Centre for Events Management it is not only important to 'know your stuff' but to be able to manipulate the information if a further scenario is given to the student which they were previously unaware of. This is a typical real life situation."

(Julia Tum, Leeds Metropolitan University, 2010)

"It made me try to be really certain that I knew what I was talking about, whereas if no-one's going to ask you a question, you can get away with much more 'unknowing'."

(Theology student, Joughin, 2008)

Putting the 'oral' into oral assessment

These factors may only come into play when students treat the assessment as genuinely oral. A presentation is not truly oral if the student is allowed simply to read aloud a written paper. Assessment takes on more of the features of orality if the student is presenting an argument, is not relying unduly on written supports, and is engaged in interaction with the examiners and/or a broader audience.

Planning oral assessment: six dimensions

Each form of oral assessment has its own unique qualities. However, whatever form the assessment takes, six dimensions of oral assessment can be used to guide the planning of new assessment tasks, to review and improve existing assessments, and to promote discussion within teaching teams about the critical features of the assessments they are designing.

Dimension 1: What is being assessed?

Do we want to assess what a student knows? Do we need to move beyond that to see what a student is able to do? Do we want to see what they can do in the context of their chosen field? Deciding on exactly what is to be assessed is usually the best first step in planning oral assessment. The focus of oral assessment typically includes one or more of the following:

- *Concepts, theories and procedures.* Oral assessment can be used to test students' knowledge at any level, but it may be particularly useful in probing students' levels of understanding and in assessing that understanding in the context of its application. While conceptual and procedural knowledge can be assessed through various methods, oral assessment may be preferred when there is a need to ensure that the responses are the students' own.
- *Applied problem solving.* This category includes the students' capacity to think on their feet, to apply their knowledge to real or hypothetical situations. Students can be called on to diagnose problems in novel situations and recommend a course of action, justifying their decisions with reference to the knowledge and understanding on which they are based.
- *Interpersonal competence.* Interpersonal competence can include how the students communicate with the examiner or examiners, how they interact with their audience in, for example, a class presentation, or how they relate to a real patient or client in a clinical setting or to a pseudo-patient or pseudo-client in a simulation.
- *Intrapersonal qualities.* Here we move onto difficult ground. Qualities such as confidence, self-awareness, professionalism and ethics are sometimes included in oral assessment, but these qualities are difficult to define, may be hard to elicit in a formal assessment context, and can be extremely difficult to judge.
- *Integrated practice.* Integrated practice goes beyond applied problem solving. It involves acting in a real or simulated context that incorporates many of the complexities of the workplace. The student teacher in front of a class, the student nurse with a patient, or the graphic design student meeting a client are each engaged in complex action involving knowledge, thoughts, feelings, attitudes and action.

Dimension 2: Interaction

One of the distinctive features of oral assessment is that it allows for interaction between the examiner/s and the student, and sometimes others, with the interaction often being rapid and unpredictable. Of course, interaction is not essential. A paper can be presented orally with little or no interruption or even discussion following it, and even where interaction does occur, marks may be awarded purely on the basis of the presentation itself. But

oral assessment lends itself to interaction, ranging from gentle probing by the examiner seeking further information to the intense interaction of a Psychology student with a client or a student arguing with her peers as she tries to convince her fellow students of the worth of the argument she is making. The level of interaction can be located on a continuum ranging from the non-interactive one-way presentation to the completely dialogic discussion between the student and examiner or student and client, with many points in between, including presentation followed by discussion; question and response followed by probing; or the debate with its presentations, challenges and final summing up.

Interaction can bring assessment to life, and the anticipation of interaction can drive the student to prepare thoroughly for the assessment. At the same time, however:

- The path of the assessment can become uncertain, so it is important to make sure that all students are treated fairly and given equal opportunities to display their knowledge
- Interaction should be planned. For example, follow-up questions that probe a student's understanding should be worked out in advance:
    - What kinds of interaction will be needed?
    - How will the examiner/s interact with the student?
    - If the student has an audience, e.g. of fellow students, how will he or she be expected to interact with them? And what role will the audience be asked to play?

Dimension 3: Authenticity

'Authenticity' here refers to the extent to which the assessment replicates 'real life' or what happens in the world of practice. The assessment may involve the use of an actual audience, realistic timeframes for preparation, collaboration between students, and tasks that are multi-dimensional and located in complex, realistic contexts. Case studies that culminate in oral presentations to a mock panel, rôle plays and simulated interviews represent common attempts to incorporate the conditions of practice within the classroom.

Dimension 4: Structure

Structure is concerned with how far the assessment follows a pre-determined set of questions or sequence of events. Students need a more-or-less predictable structure to allow them to plan for the assessment and to reduce unnecessary anxiety about unknowns, while a high degree of structure can also increase the reliability of the assessment. However, if the assessment is overly structured, the capacity to ask probing follow-up questions can be lost, as can the possibility of unpredictable questions from fellow students, both of which can cause students to seek deep understanding of what is being assessed.

- What sort and amount of structure is needed?
- What aspects of the assessment need to be highly structured?
- What aspects of the assessment should be more open?

Dimension 5: Who assesses?

Oral assessment lends itself to many possibilities regarding who is involved in the assessor role:

- Assessors from the field of practice are routinely involved in some forms of assessment. For example, barristers often take on the role of judge in law moots, health practitioners are often involved in OSCEs (Objective Structured Clinical Examinations), and architects become members of design juries.
- Many forms of oral assessment involve presentations or performance in the presence of a class of peers, in which peer evaluation and feedback can be an important aspect of the assessment. Peers may not necessarily be involved in grading, but they can play an important role in providing feedback. Student involvement in the creation of a marking scheme can encourage a much deeper understanding of the assessment process.
- Learning to evaluate the quality of one's own work is a critical ability for all students and one which they will need once their studies are completed and they enter the workforce. Oral assessment often provides opportunities for students to critically reflect on their work and identify specific strengths and areas for improvement.

In an Occupational Therapy course at the University of Newcastle, Australia, vivas were conducted by a panel of two students and one lecturer. The explicit purpose of this was to develop students' capacity for professional judgment, a quality which was seen to be a key element of their future professional practice (Mackenzie, 2000).

In the UK Centre for Events Management, Leeds Metropolitan University, tutors often invite industrialists to hear student presentations, or the tutors themselves take on the roles of representatives of the media (for example journalists from *The Guardian*, the *Daily Mail* or the local paper), so that following a media lunch the students can get some live and useful questions.

Dimension 6: Purely oral or a combination of modes?

An assessment can be purely oral, for example a clinical examination in nursing, or the oral can be combined with other modes, for example the oral presentation of a written paper or the verbal explanation of a design. It is worth noting that when a written paper is simply read to a group, or when a presentation is unduly dependent on PowerPoint slides, the oral nature of the assessment is called into question and some of the benefits of oral assessment can be lost.

Validity

Assessment is valid when it allows students to fully demonstrate their knowledge, skills and values in relation to the course they are studying. This includes fundamental qualities of their chosen discipline or profession that may lie behind the specific outcomes for an individual course. There are several kinds of validity that can throw light on the quality of oral assessment. Each provides an important check for the assessment we are designing or seeking to improve.

- *On the face of it.* 'Face validity' refers simply to whether the assessment 'on the face of it' seems likely to test what it is supposed to test. If your colleagues or even your students have doubts about this, you need to carefully review the assessment.
- *Covering the field.* 'Content validity' is about how well the assessment covers the field being studied.
    - Do the questions asked, or the presentations required, provide a good representation of the course content?
    - Is the assessment sufficiently comprehensive or are important topics not represented?
    - Equally important, does the assessment include matters that are not part of the course or have not been taught?

Detailed review of the proposed assessment by well-informed colleagues within one's discipline can help to ensure the assessment's content validity.

- *Beneath the surface.* 'Construct validity' goes beyond specific content to look at underlying qualities, including what are often called 'graduate qualities' or programme level learning outcomes such as problem solving or ethical behaviour. Ensuring construct validity is more of a challenge, but increasingly important at a time when underlying graduate qualities are becoming a strong focus for teaching, learning and assessment in universities.
- *Compared to other assessments.* 'Concurrent validity' concerns how students' performance on one assessment task correlates with their performance on other tasks designed to test the same or similar learning outcomes. In practice we rarely test the same learning outcomes in more than one way. However, we should note whether students' performances in oral assessment are noticeably different from their performance in written assessment, and think carefully about why this is occurring. It is likely to indicate something of concern in one or both of the assessments.

These aspects of validity in oral assessment tell us about how well the assessment has been designed to test what it needs to test. There are two other aspects of validity that are at least as important. They are about the consequences of the assessment:

- What effect does the assessment have on students' learning? If the assessment involves interaction, probing and responding to complex tasks, it is likely to encourage students to adopt a deep approach to learning and to be thoroughly prepared.
- How will the results of the assessment be used? In particular, what are interested parties likely to infer from the results, and how valid will these inferences be?

Reliability

When a student has completed an oral assessment, can we be confident that he or she would do equally well if they were asked other questions? Given a different scenario to respond to? Assessed by another colleague? Assessed at another time? Reliability is concerned with how dependent students' results are on what case or scenario they are given (inter-case reliability); what specific questions, including follow-up questions, they are asked (inter-item consistency); who examines them (inter-rater reliability); and how an examiner's judgments might change over the course of assessing many students (intra-rater reliability). Problems in any of these areas lead to errors in judging students' abilities. Fortunately there are a number of steps that can be taken to increase the reliability of oral assessments:

- If the assessment can only be based on a single case or scenario, try to ensure that the case or scenario is as representative of the field as possible. Reliability is usually significantly increased if students are assessed on several cases.
- Where the assessment is based on questioning, increasing the number of questions asked is likely to increase reliability.
- Panels are often used to increase reliability. If several examiners, including examiners from outside the university, are used, training is essential. Examiners need to be familiar with the content and underlying constructs being examined and the criteria being used. Where possible, all examiners should be involved in developing the specific assessment being used.
- If panels of examiners are used, panel members can be rotated across panels.
- A rubric or marking guide with explicit criteria and standards will be helpful in any situation.
- Model answers may also be useful in developing a common understanding of criteria and standards across markers.

Fairness

'Fairness' means that students who are equally knowledgeable should do equally well in an assessment. Fairness entails both an absence of bias and an equal opportunity for all students to develop and demonstrate their ability.

Bias can occur when obviously irrelevant factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, educational background or class consciously or subconsciously affect an examiner's judgment. Bias can arise in two other ways:

- When questions or cases unnecessarily favour one group of students over another. For example, in a Health Economics course for international students and local students, scenarios based on a single country are likely to be more difficult to respond to for some students than others. To guard against this, it is advisable to have at least two colleagues from different backgrounds review the assessment cases or questions.
- When a group of students responds to the assessment in ways that could not be anticipated, indicating that the oral response format posed difficulties for that group but not others. This type of unfairness may arise when students are being assessed in other than their first language, if the level of language required by the assessment is higher than that required by the course itself or by the context of the students' future work.

"I use a lot of oral assessment in the form of individual vivas. In some modules this is what I use for the reassessment of those who have failed, but in others it is the only mode of assessment.

For me, and I believe for our students, the biggest advantage is that we can draw out what they know by asking for further explanation, or probing a little further. I would argue that, although some students may initially find the prospect of face-to-face assessment a little daunting, it is by far the fairest assessment method in that it is so much easier to differentiate: to allow those who have a good grasp of the subject to really shine by answering complex questions, and those who struggle to be coaxed into at least revealing what they understand. There is much less risk that students will not understand what they are being asked to do in the assessment."

(Belinda Cooke, Teacher Fellow and Principal Lecturer in Physical Education, Leeds Metropolitan University)

Marking and grading

Criteria and rubrics

One of the advantages of oral assessment is that it can often be marked quickly on the spot. To support this, the use of a marking guide or rubric of some sort is usually essential. The use of rubrics in oral assessment has many benefits:

- It provides assessors with a common reference point for their judgments
- It reduces the likelihood that judgments will be based on extraneous factors
- Providing students with the marking guide in advance helps them understand the nature of good work and helps them to evaluate the quality of their own work in the assessment
- It provides a basis for peer evaluation/feedback
- It makes marking more efficient
- It provides a useful framework for feedback to students.

Jenny Moon of Exeter University has developed a list of 27 assessable features of oral assessment that can be used as a trigger to identify criteria for specific assessments. These are available on the International Staff website (International Staff, n.d.).

The History Department at Sheffield University has developed a set of grade descriptors, ranging from Failure to First Class, for oral presentation tasks, which may be a useful model for presentations in other disciplines (History Department, Sheffield University, n.d.).

In developing criteria and rubrics, it is important to be careful about the place of presentation skills *per se*, and to focus the assessment on what has been taught and the intended learning outcomes for the course.

Recording

Assessors will often need to take notes during the assessment. These will support their memory at the end of the assessment when marking occurs and can be used in providing feedback at that point or later on. It can be difficult to ask questions of a student, attend carefully to what they are saying, and take notes at the same time. If more than one assessor is involved, one of them can record notes while the other leads the questioning. A sheet with the headings from the marking guide or rubric is recommended.

Making an audio or video recording of the assessment is highly recommended. In the event of a student seeking a review of a mark, such a record is essential. Many universities require all oral assessment to be recorded.

One study of decision-making in postgraduate medical education highlighted examiners' tendencies to form an early impression of the candidate and then use the subsequent questions and responses to confirm or disconfirm this impression (Yaphe & Street, 2003).

Preparing students for oral assessment

Students will have had varying experiences of oral assessment at school or on previous courses. These are likely to have informed their expectations about oral assessment and how they should prepare. The oral assessment that they are about to undergo may be quite different.

Students need to learn about forms of assessment just as they learn about other things. Rarely is it enough simply to tell students in writing or verbally in class what is required. Seeing examples of assessment (either live or on video), having opportunities to discuss expectations, and having opportunities to practise the assessment format before it is used for formal purposes are all important ways of preparing for oral assessment.

Some suggestions for preparing students

Several steps can be taken to help familiarise students with the oral assessment format and requirements:

- Find out what previous experiences of oral assessment your students have had as a basis for comparing and contrasting your assessment.
- Provide clear written information about the assessment and spend time discussing this in class.
- Provide opportunities for practice in class time. For example, if the assessment is based on group presentations, build short presentation activities with time for discussion and feedback into regular class time.
- If the assessment is carried out in front of peers, use peer evaluation and feedback to help students become familiar with criteria and standards.
- Take time to debrief students following the assessment. Verbal feedback and the opportunity to discuss what went well and where improvement could be made will help students in similar future assessments.
- Students are often not experienced in expressing themselves orally within their chosen discipline. Build in opportunities for speaking in class, in different informal and semi-formal ways. Use in-class strategies that require all students to speak frequently, including short talks.

Occupational Therapy students in a problem-based learning programme at the University of Newcastle, Australia, routinely worked through case scenarios in a small group to identify their learning needs, research the case, and present an intervention plan. They were therefore well prepared for their individual vivas where they were given a scenario a week before the viva, then presented and were questioned on their intervention plan (Mackenzie, 2000).

In a Contract Law 'mini-viva' at the Queensland University of Technology, the teaching team produced a 15-minute video on how to prepare for the assessment, including a mock mini-viva (Butler & Wiseman, 1993). Similarly, Brunel University has developed videos of students rehearsing presentations (Brunel University).

In the final year of a strategic Events Management course at Leeds Metropolitan University, the students undergo formative oral assessment every week. They are encouraged to apply the theory that has been covered in that week to a real event management company. They present to the tutor and to their peers, and get extensive feedback from their colleagues and tutor. They then use this feedback in the preparation of their summatively assessed work.

Also at the UK Centre for Events Management, Leeds Metropolitan University, Level 2 Events Management students undertaking an OSCE-style assessment (called Practically Assessed Structured Scenarios) are shown videos of the assessment from the previous year.

Public speaking or learning to communicate in a particular field?

One of the functions of oral assessment is to help prepare students for the kinds of communication in which they will need to engage in their future work. The forms of communication required in the workplace have little to do with 'public speaking'. A presentation of a design to a client may follow a particular structure, one that is quite different to a barrister making a closing argument in a court case.

It may be instructive to identify a range of oral communication forms or genres in your own field and see how these can be incorporated into your students' learning activities and assessments. As students experience these and reflect on them, they will become familiar with their particular purposes and structures (Morton & O'Brien, 2005).

The case of the PhD viva

While some students find the PhD viva an invigorating confirmation of their work, for many other successful candidates it can represent a demoralising questioning of that work. Any PhD supervisor would do well to consider the growing literature on viva preparation if they have not already done so. While the process of examination can be difficult to predict, there are some steps that may help students prepare for the viva:

- Welcome the student into your Department's research culture, including providing opportunities to present and discuss their work within the Department as well as externally
- Arrange for a mock viva well before the real thing
- Talk to your students about what aspects of the thesis the examiners are likely to focus on, as well as the kind of process your students should expect
- Encourage your students to read one of the growing number of books on 'how to get a PhD' (Tinkler & Jackson, 2002).

Conclusion

Assessment is at the heart of learning and decisions about the modes and methods of assessment can exercise a profound influence on students' experience, how they perceive their courses, how they relate to each other and to their teachers, and how they prepare for the world of practice beyond the university. Teaching, learning and assessment processes that strengthen students' engagement with ideas, that develop identity, and that build relationships within communities of learning depend on multiple modes of communication. In an age of mass higher education, the continuing and expanding use of oral assessment as part of a carefully designed mix of assessment types provides rich opportunities for student engagement as well as opportunities for enhanced judgments about student achievement.

While oral assessment raises many challenges, it also offers considerable rewards for teachers and students alike. It is hoped that the ideas and examples presented in this guide will encourage you to continue and even extend your use of oral assessment, or to begin using oral assessment if you aren't already doing so. Hopefully the guide will also help promote discussion with fellow teachers and students about how to develop this critical aspect of our role as educators.

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About the author

Gordon Joughin is an Associate Professor in the Academic Development Unit at the University of Wollongong, Australia and a Visiting Professor at Leeds Metropolitan University. He has written extensively on assessment matters, with a focus on oral assessment and the influence this form of assessment can have on student learning. He has worked with academic staff in universities in Australia, the UK, Hong Kong, Canada and Europe and is the editor of *Assessment, Learning and Judgement in Higher Education.*

Contact: gordonj@uow.edu.au

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