


Chapter 7


The Theory and Implementation of Online University Oral Exams

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter explores the role and nature of online oral exams (vivas), in particular ones in university settings. Whereas oral exams experienced periods of decline during their long history, a limited revival of them can be witnessed in recent years. The transference to digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the application of virtual oral exams, which can offer personalized interaction between candidates and examiners. Additionally, oral exams can enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, communication skills and competences through dynamic, real-time dialogues. Despite challenges, such as the unsuitability of vivas for large student numbers, online oral exams foster student-teacher dialogues, improve technical and communication skills and competences, and provide a flexible and comprehensive approach to assessing learning outcomes. This chapter underscores the potential of a viva as an adaptable, effective assessment instrument in modern educational contexts by providing a theoretical framework and informative findings of two case studies.

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INTRODUCTION

The custom of oral examinations as an assessment tool and method dates back to several centuries; nevertheless, oral exams can be regarded as neglected educational measuring instruments since the mid-20th century. Oral exams have had a long tradition originating in the 1500s within the academic contexts of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge using Latin as a working language. Nonetheless, the tendency of the negligence of orality gradually emerged and extended in the 1800–1900s while the 20th century saw a partial re-occurrence of the oral form of assessment in education but it was limited. Regarding the 21st century, university oral exams are present but still scarce (Huxham et al., 2012; Joughin, 1998) and they are dependent on the nature of the particular course, the number of students as well as institutional policy. A fundamental argumentation against orality in exam contexts is its dubious objectivity and reliability (Ahmed et al., 1999).

Oral examinations offer a unique and comprehensive approach to assessing students' comprehension. Oral exams, unlike written tests, are conducted through a dynamic dialogue where the examiner can ask further questions or clarify ambiguities and probe students' reasoning. This real-time engagement facilitates a more tailored and beneficial testing experience, allowing students to pose enquiries instantaneously and to receive reflective feedback while completing an exam. Written examinations may not always be the most effective means of evaluating complex cognitive abilities, such as critical thinking and problem-solving; nevertheless, oral examinations may effectively solve this obstacle. This dialogic nature of oral exams aligns with Gaudet's findings (2015), which highlight the motivational impact on students, enhancing intrinsic interest in the subject and often leading to more meaningful learning outcomes.

The unprecedented lockdown of 2020–2021 worldwide launched the rapid evolution of virtual platforms for educational purposes, which involved an urgent demand for methods and techniques which can leverage the efficient implementation of oral examinations and testing as well. Online oral exams may have many favourable effects e.g. a more sensitive reaction to examinees' emotions and vivas can also safeguard individual assessment (Stray, 2001). Furthermore, oral exams lend themselves to students' simultaneous and integrated assessment regarding their certain key competences and skills e.g., critical thinking, analytical skills, creativity and problem-solving (European Commission, 2019; Sabin et al., 2021). Concurrently, less beneficial effects can also be associated with oral exams, e.g. its unsuitability to test a large number of students. As a result of the composite changes and challenges in the constantly altering 21st century milieu, it can be acknowledged that it is relevant for stakeholders to explore the issues and constituents of university online oral exams.

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