

Oral Exams: An Alternative Evaluation Method***

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Faculty are always seeking better ways to evaluate student learning. Oral examinations can be a viable assessment strategy when multiple assessment techniques are used – for example, a paper, an essay exam and an oral exam. “When carefully planned, administered, and evaluated, oral achievement test are fairly reliable assessments of abilities and skills, many of which are inadequately measured by written objective or essay examinations.”¹

One of the authors administered oral exams twice a year to students enrolled in Sociology of Health, covering a three-years-period. The course syllabus explained the process as follows: the mid-quarter exam will consist of a 30-minute individual oral exam in which you will be asked ten questions concerning course content. The session will be recorded (with your permission) for review prior to assigning a grade based on adequacy and appropriateness of answers. Questions will be more open-ended than specific, and there will be a time limit on each question to ensure the exam can be completed within 30 minutes.

The instructor delineated key points for successful responses, gave an example question and answer, and named two of the ten concepts that would be tested to assuage some of the anxiety associated with a new and untested method of evaluation.

To prepare for the exam, the instructor posted a large “Do Not Disturb-Testing In Progress” sign on her office door, forwarded the phone to the secretary, arranged a comfortable chair for the student, and placed the tape recorder in the periphery. After the instructor greeted the student, she requested that the student sign a form granting permission to tape record the evaluation and promised test confidentially to the student.

The exam began with the first two expected questions. An example is, “Relate age, gender, ethnicity, and social

class to health using life expectancy, morbidity, mortality, and health services utilization rates.” Answers did not have to include specific statistics, but they had to include the relationship of gender, children, adults, and older adults; African-Americans, Asian-American, Native American and Latinos; and upper, middle, and lower socioeconomic classes to the concepts of life expectancy, morbidity, mortality, and health service use rates. For example, in general, women in the United States have longer life expectancies than men, higher levels of morbidity but lower levels of mortality, and higher use of health services, even when maternity services are excluded from analysis. To grade the students, the instructor reviewed the audiotapes and compared the answers to the criteria for adequacy and appropriateness of responses.

Student evaluations of the oral exam were very positive! Although not statistically significant, the means of the oral exams exceeded those of the written final exams for every class. The only negative responses were anxiety and nervousness before the exam. The instructor gained a better understanding of where the students were in relation to comprehending the course concepts. Nevertheless, the administration of the exam was exhausting when more than six students were scheduled sequentially.

In conclusion, the authors recommend oral exams as an alternative evaluation method of student learning. Oral exams offer another viable perspective on students’ understanding of material, and when used with other more traditional assessment techniques such as papers and written exams, oral exams add a significant dimension to the evaluation process.

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