Titel

DUT Guide: Strategies for criteria-aligned, fair and inclusive oral exams

Forfattere

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The oral exam is an established assessment method in Danish higher education institutions (HEIs), favoured for its focus on oracy and authenticity. The planning and implementation of oral exams in Danish HEIs' Programmes of Study provides the context for this guide's discussion; however, the recommendations on inclusive practices are more widely applicable. This guide reviews current understanding of how oral exams can facilitate deep learning and strategies for ensuring they are criteria-aligned, fair and inclusive. The guide comprises ten practical points and links to further resources, which include praxis-based suggestions for teachers, examiners and censors with responsibility for oral exams.

Practical Points

1. Align learning outcomes and assessment
2. Integrate preparation for the oral exam into the course
3. Reduce student anxieties
4. Ensure students experience inclusive oral exams
5. Select and design oral exam tasks
6. Share assessment criteria for the oral exam
7. Plan questions to ask during the oral exam
8. Mitigate possible biases
9. Co-examine supportively and fairly
10. Grade and give feedback and feed-forward

Background

The oral examination is a popular assessment method in the Danish education system, a legacy from Danish High Schools' focus on oral learning (Andersen and Cozart, 2014) and a preference for authentic assessment, which is applicable to academic, employment and societal settings (Joughran, 2007). In addition, oral exams engage learners in 'cognitively elaborating' their understanding, a process found to contribute to learner motivation and deeper learning (Slavin, 2014). Ministerial law and regulations for university education require aligning course learning outcomes (LOs) and assessment methods as well as distributing a variety of assessment methods across a Programme of Study, both of which require scrutiny of assessment method selection (www.retsinformation.dk). To achieve alignment and assess breadth and depth of learning, combined or mixed assessment methods can offer the fairest

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way to assess LOs (Biggs and Tang, 2007), and oral exams are often combined with a prior submission (Andersen and Tofteskov, 2007).

Whilst international students who are unfamiliar with oral exams need particularly clear guidance (Carroll, 2015; Roberts et al. 2000), all students benefit from clear assessment guidance (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Time-pressured oral exams can induce high anxiety levels (Simper, 2010), particularly for students with low self-concepts (Ringeisen et al. 2019). Nevertheless, students may still favour oral exams because of the opportunity to clarify and explain their answers (Hazen, 2020; Simper, 2010), which can make assessment more inclusive (Huxham et al. 2012). In this guide, inclusion is understood as 'pedagogy, curricula and assessment, [which] are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible' (Hockings, 2010).

Oral exams can provide a forum for probing and challenging questions (Sayre, 2014; Joughran, 2007). By pre-designing criteria-aligned closed and open questions, the teacher/examiner is better equipped to facilitate quality interactions in time-pressured oral exams (Albergaria-Almeidaa, 2010). Such preparation facilitates the standardisation of questions and question difficulty for all examinees. If the questions are otherwise bias free, standardisation has the potential to positively affect fairness of the exam and test validity. During the course, students and the teacher can prepare for the oral exam, clarifying expectations, sharing and practising indicative questions in oral exam scenarios (Huchinson, 2019; Sayre, 2014).

By involving students in co-constructing assessment criteria and oral exam questions, their anxieties are reduced as they work with these self-assessment tools to best prepare their responses (Sadler, 2002). Examiners may prefer oral exams to written assessments as they can probe a student's understanding and fairly assess his/her individual learning (Joughran, 1998). However, unlike the bias mitigation which may be offered by anonymous exams (Malouff and Thorsteinsson, 2016), fairness may be compromised by examiners' biases (Roberts et al., 2000; Hazen, 2020). Effective use of strategies for addressing biases in oral exams can help allay examiners' and students' concerns and support pedagogically inclusive and fair assessment (Roberts et al., 2000).

1. Align learning outcomes and assessment

Oral exams are clearly well aligned with LOs which focus on communication skills or the practical application of knowledge such as Objective, Structured Clinical Examinations (Harden, 1988). However, they have a broader scope when used to probe depth of knowledge and understanding and when combined with other methods such as projects, performances and written assignments (Joughran, 1998). A combined assessment methods approach can support students' assessment performance by optimising alignment between assessment methods and diverse LOs. It is advisable for the teacher to be clear which LOs each assessment method is designed to assess and whether sharing this with the students would facilitate deeper learning. (Andersen and Tofteskov, 2007).

Besides these examples, there are courses wherein the oral exam is the sole assessment method, with the rationale that oral exams provide the most secure appraisal of an individual's knowledge or understanding, no cheating is possible. However, this is more a security than a pedagogic rationale and one which warrants a clearer review of the alignment between LOs and assessment method and Joughran's (1998) 'dimensions' of oral assessment which include primary content type, interaction, authenticity, structure, examiners and orality.

2. Integrate preparation for the oral exam into the course

In addition to alignment, learners need learning activities which support the learning process towards the final assessment and beyond. Hence including practice oral exams during the course focuses attention on how LOs will be assessed during the exam, whilst providing experiential opportunities for trial, error and feedback (Andersen and Tofteskov, 2007), which can mitigate student anxieties. The activity below was designed for face to face taught courses but could be readily adapted to online courses, using breakout rooms for the triads.

Practising oral exams

- Share some indicative oral exam questions with the students.
- Arrange students in groups of three: one takes the examiner role, one the student role and one an observer role.
- Explain they need to practise asking and answering the questions, changing roles each time with the observer noting their observations and queries they all have about the questions and the oral exam process.
- If the oral exam will include board-work, presentations etc., include these in the task making it as authentic as possible.
- After 30 minutes (10 min in each role), reconvene and invite triads to share what they learned from the process and discuss issues.
- Add issues and responses to FAQs about the oral exam on the course's e-learning platform.

3. Reduce student anxieties

Oral exams are known to elicit higher anxiety levels than other assessment methods, and heightened anxiety may compromise performance and outcomes when self-efficacy is low (Ringeisen et al. 2019). Teachers can guide students towards strategies to manage anxiety, experience mastery (Bandura, 1977) and develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2000; 2006).

Strategies which signal teacher support and accessibility include: class-time for discussing oral exams, a well monitored discussion board on the course's e-learning platform for students to post their questions, reminding students that during the exam they can request questions to be repeated or re-phrased. It is also reassuring for students to know beforehand how their examiner/s will respond if they answer incorrectly. Unambiguous examiner responses, "Try again, my question is focusing on…" can be less stressful and provide clearer signposts for an examinee than implicit, culturally intoned signals, "Mmmm".

The oral skills required in oral exams improve with practice, and rehearsing answering out loud helps students review what they do and do not know (Huxham et al. 2012; Huchinson, 2019). Providing students with a self-portrait photo of the examiner, telling them to practise their oral exam presentations and answers whilst looking at the teacher's photo on screen makes the interaction personable and familiarises students with the intense one to one situation in an oral exam.

4. Ensure students experience inclusive oral exams

Despite experiencing heightened anxiety, students may prefer oral to written exams because they appreciate the dialogical interaction (Hazen, 2020; Simper, 2010). However, others who experience learning, language or cultural challenges benefit from additional strategies. Group

students who are familiar and unfamiliar with oral exams and encourage them to share insights and questions. Remember students examined through an additional language may need more time to compose their answers (Roberts et al. 2000). Ensure all students have the same exam information by sharing an introduction script during the course and at the start of each oral exam:

- Introduce the student and the censor.
- Explain the structure and timing of the exam.
- Reassure the student that they can ask you to read aloud, repeat or re-phrase.
- Explain how they will find out their grade and feedback.
- Affirm that you will support them to do their best.

Students, especially those with dyslexia or other neuro-diversities (Griffin and Pollack, 2009), may struggle to remember keywords or their pronunciation. Encourage them to bring their own keyword lists and provide pen and paper; if a student is unsure how to pronounce a word, they can point to or write the word or draw a diagram to help express themselves.

5. Select and design oral exam tasks

Being explicit about the purpose of the oral exam during the course, guides students towards relevant preparation (Andersen and Tofteskov, 2007). In combined assessment contexts, the examinee may start with a short review of their pre-submission and their reflections on their learning. Depending on the course alignment and the weighting of the submission, the subsequent oral exam questions may probe the depth and breadth of the examinee's knowledge and understanding beyond their submission.

Oral exams which start with the random selection of an opening question can incentivise students to revise the full course curriculum, albeit at a surface level. Sharing the list of opening questions or even indicative questions in good time prior to the oral exam, provides a revision guide for students, and help reduce anxiety. When preparing a selection of written questions to be selected from by the examinee, it is important to review the course LOs and check the alignment between them and the questions, this is especially evident in the choice of verb. For example, if the taxonomic level of an LO is in the 'application' category, then designing a pick-up question at a higher taxonomic level would be unaligned (Bloom, 1956).

6. Share assessment criteria for the oral exam

Assessment rubrics can help students see how course learning outcomes align with individual assessments and clarify expectations between the teacher and students (Andrade, 2005).

By including indicative oral exam questions for each criterion, the oral exam rubric provides a helpful revision framework for students and engages the teacher in pre-planning indicative aligned questions. See the example rows from a questioning rubric for an oral exam from a Bachelors in Engineering course below.

Co-developing an oral exam rubric with students increases their ownership of the questions and supports their cognitive elaboration (Slavin, 2014) and mastery (Bandura, 1977). In Table 1, the questions in italics were designed by students on the course. Clearly, the examiners have the prerogative to elaborate on questions during the exam but having a core set of aligned questions is reassuring for all parties and helps standardise questioning (Andersen and Tofteskov, 2007).

Oral Exam Questions Rubric

Bachelors in Engineering Course, 2018

These questions are indicative of the questions you will be asked during the oral exam. We recommend that you prepare for similar questions, but do not expect to be asked the same questions as shown below.

Course Learning Outcomes	Danish Grade Scale					
	12 Excellent performance displaying a high level of command of all aspects of the relevant material, with no or only a few minor weaknesses.	10 Very Good performance displaying a high level of command of most aspects of the relevant material, with only minor weaknesses	7 Good performance displaying good command of the relevant material, but also some weaknesses	4 Fair performance displaying some command of the relevant material, but also some major weaknesses	2 Minimally adequate performance	0 Inadequate performance (-3 Unacceptable in all aspects is not included in this rubric)
C1. Reflecting on and adjusting the project management and collaboration process of the team and project.	What have you learnt from these adjustments? How do you think your adjustment experiences will influence your future project management and team collaborations?	*What did you notice about the effects of your team's adjustments to project management and the collaboration process?* *Explain the changes and why they were good changes?*	*How could you apply the same project management and collaboration process to other projects? Why?*	*Explain why you made an adjustment to the collaboration process? Highlight the reasons for the adjustment.*	Share an example of how your team adjusted your project's management and collaboration process.	Unable to share an example of how his/her team adjusted his/her project's management and collaboration process

Table 1: Oral Exam Questions Rubric

According to the course leader, the oral exam rubric "scaffolds everything". Whilst there is not time during the exam to consult the rubric, having pre-prepared the rubric and aligned the oral exam questions with the LOs "you can discuss, at a more or less abstract level, these things with the student, depending on how well he or she performs…And that rubric helps throughout the course in calming everybody down, students and teachers alike".

7. Plan questions to ask during the oral exam

Oral exams for course assessment are generally time-pressured, their rationale is to probe and scrutinise the examinees' understanding, and with skilful questioning, examinees can show their best. Oral exams must be fit for purpose, and if it is a group oral exam, questioning

time must be equally distributed amongst the group members (Danish Ministerial Order no. 22 of 9 January 2020). Therefore, time is of the essence and having a pre-prepared list of criteria-aligned questions before the exam will ease the examiners' burden, standardise questions and thereby help mitigate bias.

Starting with open and reflective questions, "What would you say is your most important learning achievement during the course?" provide examinees with a reassuring exam entry point. Closed questions serve useful purposes, to assess knowledge and provide a platform for open questions. However, it is worth scrutinising questions which are presented as open questions such as, "Why is that relevant?" or "What other examples do you know?" but are designed to elicit specific answers (Andersen and Tofteskov, 2007). Verb taxonomies including Bloom and SOLO can help with designing aligned questions which scaffold high order thinking and responses.

8. Mitigate possible biases

Biases help us make sense of our complex world. However, they also influence our interactions and judgments (Unlimited, n.d.). Whilst anonymous marking may mitigate the effects of examiners' cognitive and personal biases (Malouff and Thorsteinsson, 2016), oral exams are more susceptible. The 'cognitive bias cheat sheet' (Benson, n.d.) raises awareness of different biases and the 'Oral Exam checklist for bias aware assessment – 15 check ins' offers specific strategies. After piloting the checklist, the course teacher concluded "this check list could help both students and teachers…the students could ask 'listen, point 8, we haven't really discussed this, what does this mean, why do we not bring this into class?'….You can spend your time in a valuable way instead of just walking through what people already know. The checklist would scaffold both students and teachers towards the exam", thereby supporting criteria-aligned, transparent and fair oral exams.

9. Co-examine supportively and fairly

When co-teaching and co-examining, it is important to share understanding of the LO alignment and the purpose of the course assessment. Co-examiner expectations may still vary during the exam situation and drawing on pre-planned questions, checklists or questioning rubrics can support criteria-aligned assessment.

Currently, a third of a programme of study's graded courses must be co-examined by external censors who should ensure fair process (Danish Ministerial Order no. 22 of 9 January 2020; Andersen and Tofteskov, 2007). In good time before the oral exam it is recommended to share course and assignment information, negotiate and agree exam roles and responsibilities in line with examination regulations. As written notes must be taken during the oral exam, it is common practice for the teacher to assume the main examining role whilst the censor observes, takes notes and may ask questions.

As it is not permitted to record oral exams (Danish Ministerial Order no. 22 of 9 January 2020), an independent observer could attend a random selection of co-examined oral exams up to the deliberation phase, take notes and share their observations with the examining team. These observations would provide insights into the parity of the student experiences. To ensure GDPR compliance, students' and examiners' permission may be required for note taking (GDPR, n.d.).

10. Grade and give feedback and feed-forward

A time-efficient and reliable note-taking process is necessary in all oral exams, particularly when examining without a censor. By ticking off questions from a pre-prepared list and noting the quality of the responses, the examiner or censor can collect relevant and formative data. Oral exams are often time-pressured, and to aid recall and mitigate the impact of biases, it is recommended to quickly review the notes to ascertain the quality of the examinees' responses before deciding on the final grade.

If the teacher and censor disagree over a grade, the average of their grades is rounded to the nearest grade in the grade scale. However, if the average is equidistant between two grades, for example if the two grades are 4 and 7, giving an average of 5.5, the censor's grade determines the final grade (Danish Ministerial Order no. 114 of 3 February 2015). This reinforces the importance of explicit assessment criteria and mutually agreed weighting prior to the exam. For feedback to be informative, it should exemplify how the students' answers matched the criteria for the confirmed grade and from a feed-forward perspective, include recommendations for ongoing deep learning and strategies for improving or developing their oral exam technique.

Conclusion

The oral exam provides a unique assessment opportunity for examiners to probe an examinee's understanding and to scaffold a dialogue with challenging questions whilst simulating an authentic context. As oral exams are often time-pressured, preparation by the examiner and examinees is imperative. To achieve a quality oral exam interaction, through which the examinee's learning is fairly and accurately assessed the teacher explicitly aligns the oral exam with the course LOs and the teaching and learning process. Oral exams can induce high anxiety levels. However, if well managed, examinees can learn from and appreciate the opportunity to explain their understanding. Examiners must, however, be mindful of the impact of biases during the oral exam and implement bias mitigation strategies. Resources such as checklists can support all aspects of oral exam preparation, ensure the examiners' attention to bias mitigation and reassure students that the exam is criteria-aligned, transparent and fair.

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