

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Evaluative Conversations: exploring the student perception of viva voce assessment on learning and success

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: This paper presents findings from the evaluation of an assessment design aimed at developing critical-judgements and debating skills of undergraduate students. We focus on student perceptions of 'evaluative conversations' with the aim to identify barriers and enablers to the implementation of viva voce examinations. To develop our analysis, we focus on the experience of a History of Economic Thought (HET) module run at the University of East Anglia. Following a mixed-method approach, we combine quantitative and qualitative indicators of the student experience, collected through a questionnaire administered to students enrolled in the module (N=30). Our findings highlight that students who self-report underperforming in their viva voce examination recognise their lack of preparation as the cause. On the other hand, the narratives of students who believe having performed well identify: the use of exemplars, the feed-forward structure of the assessment process, and the examiner's emotionally intelligent approach, as enablers of success.

Carless, D.R. 2002. The 'Mini-Viva' As A Tool To Enhance Assessment For Learning. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 27 (4), pp. 353-363.

Carless, D., and Boud, D. 2018. The Development of Student Feedback Literacy: enabling uptake of feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43 (8), 1315-1325.

Paper:

This paper presents findings from the evaluation of an innovative assessment design aimed at developing critical judgements and debating skills of undergraduate students. In this preliminary analysis, we focus on student perceptions of 'evaluative conversations' with the aim to identify barriers and enablers to the implementation of viva voce examinations.

Whilst viva voce examinations are common in doctoral assessment across a range of different disciplines, this type of assessment is seldom adopted to develop and to appraise learning in

undergraduate modules. There are some examples of successful applications of this practice to undergraduate assessment in diverse disciplines such as Nursing (Davis & Engward, 2018), Dentistry (Ganji, 2017), Business Studies (Pearce & Lee, 2009), Mathematics (Iannone & Simpson, 2012), and Education (Carless, 2002). However, the viva voce remains an under-utilised form of assessment (Hunsell *et al.*, 2007; Iannone & Simpson, 2012). This type of assessment also appears to be under-researched and not fully conceptualised (Dobson, 2008) in the education literature.

To develop our analysis, we focus on the experience of a History of Economic Thought (HET) module run by the School of Economics of the University of East Anglia. The module is optional and available to all Year 2 and Year 3 students in Economics; it also attracts students from the School of International Development, as well as students visiting from other institutions. The assessment structure of the HET module consists of three summative pieces: (i) a group video-presentation; (ii) a critical essay; and (iii) an evaluative conversation (akin to a viva voce). Whilst the group presentation constitutes a stand-alone component of assessment, the critical essay and evaluative conversation assessments are inter-linked. The evaluative conversation is designed to enable students to demonstrate how they have acted upon the feedback received on their critical essay. This assessment design resonates with the work of Carless (2002), where the viva voce served as an appraisal of the essay piece, after its submission but prior to marking. However, our design generates more structured feed-forward dynamics because students' engagement with the feedback received on their essay assignment directly affects their performance in the final evaluative conversation.

The evaluation of the impact of viva voce examinations on student performance was developed through a mix-method approach. We analysed student performance in the evaluative conversation, and we associated it to a set of quantitative and qualitative indicators collected through a questionnaire administered to students enrolled in the HET module (N=30). The questionnaire surveyed different dimensions of student learning and experience, including: (i) demographic variables, such as gender, student domicile, and native language; (ii) a self-assessment of each student's evaluative conversation performance; (iii) an evaluation of the HET module as a whole, as well as (iv) measurements obtained through the Feedback Orientation Scale (Linderbaum and Levy, 2010). Adhering to an ethical protocol embedding informed consent, questionnaires were administered to students at the end of their evaluative conversation assessment, but prior to revealing marks awarded. Participation in this survey was not compulsory and the response rate was 60%. Whilst the relationship between quantitative indicators were analysed through standard univariate, bivariate and multivariate statistical analysis, qualitative statements were classified thematically and combined with statistical indicators to inform the interpretation of findings.

The results of our preliminary analysis highlight that 87% of participants were satisfied with their module experience. A breakdown of summary statistics shows that student module experience was *as expected* and *better than expected* for 53% and 33% of respondents, respectively. 60% of the respondents perceived that their performance in their evaluative conversation was in line with what they expected (27%), or better than expected (33%). The thematic analysis of students' feedback on their viva voce assessment experience uncovered four main themes: anxiety/confidence in the task, preparation for the task, challenge of the task, and the support received to face the task. Unsurprisingly, students who perceive having performed below expectations, report experiencing anxiety during their assessment, whilst students perceiving their performance in line or above their expectations explicitly mention feeling or developing confidence in their abilities to do well. However,

while the narratives of underperforming students are mainly centred on lack of preparation on their behalf, students performing in line or above their expectations explicitly mention the supportive environment in which assessment took place as an enabler of success. These findings highlight that the use of exemplars (Sadler, 2010; Carless & Boud, 2018), the feed-forward structure of assessment, as well as the emotional intelligence of the examiner, i.e. friendly and encouraging attitude during oral assessment (Goleman, 1996), were perceived as supportive to student success.

Through further developments of our research agenda, we plan to (i) conduct an analysis of the students' feedback orientation measures already collected in our dataset, and to (ii) investigate patterns of correlation between students' perceptions of viva voce assessment with measures of their orientation to feedback, as well as with the evaluations received by their examiner. Our aim is to develop a comprehensive map of tools that can be implemented to scaffold a successful implementation of viva voce examinations in undergraduate module, and equip both teachers and students with the opportunity to reap the benefits from this unconventional method of assessment at undergraduate level.

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