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**Geography & The Environment**

## **Using Oral Exams for assessment: Experiences from Geography**

### **The Challenge**

Oral exams are widely used in language classes to test linguistic ability but have been largely abandoned as a means of assessing students' knowledge and understanding of thematic material. In this study, I explore students' experiences with oral exams in human geography classes, asking whether there is still a role for orals in the social sciences.

### **The Approach**

Oral exams were incorporated as one assessment strategy in two classes on health geography: the first a standard term-time lecture-based class, the second an interterm field-based class. Students were provided with sample oral questions to prepare in advance and given time in class to practice answering questions orally. Students then sat a 15-minute oral exam with their instructor(s), in which they were asked to respond to some of the questions that they had prepared. After taking the oral exam, the students were asked to complete a short questionnaire that explored their reflections on the experience.

## How it Went

I had expected some resistance to the idea of oral exams as a means of assessment from students—partly because it is a format that is largely unknown to many students, and partly because I believed it might be a stressful experience for some. Much to my surprise, almost all students were open to the idea of trying out the technique and some were actively enthusiastic.

Although I have not yet completed the analysis of the survey (and still have two more classes to collect data in before the study is complete), early results suggest that students were generally supportive of the idea of using orals more widely in order to support particular learning goals. Many students said that they found it easier to explain what they knew verbally than on paper, and some suggested that they had studied harder for the oral than they would have for a written exam. Having said that, I still have some reservations. First, I believe that orals are not appropriate to test all sorts of learning and am interested to reflect further on when and where orals might have a role to play and where they might actually hinder student learning or the effectiveness of assessment. Second, I would be interested to know the experiences of students for whom English is not their first language, but have not had any English language learners in the classes surveyed so far.

## Advice for Others

Luckily, this project ran very smoothly, and I experienced lots of student support for it. My one main frustration was that I was not able to test the *effectiveness* of orals, only student *experiences* with them. In other words, I wasn't able to rigorously analyze how student learning differed when students were assessed using orals versus more traditional methods as I didn't have two randomly-assigned experimental groups to compare.

I would suggest that coming to terms with some of the constraints that your project will face is important right at the start of a SOTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) project—few of us will have the opportunity to run two identical classes and apply a particular learning technique to just one of those classes in order to assess a teaching strategy experimentally! Once I came to terms with this, I was able to better see what I could nonetheless achieve with a small study in several small classes.



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