Oral examination and assessment

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Chapter 7: Oral examination: importance and procedure

7.1 The view on oral examination
When evaluating an exam type it is important to include the fundamental competencies that it is based on and which it seeks to develop. Oral and written exams alike require a certain aptitude for structure and communication, and an examinee’s performance can be enhanced by good language skills. Both oral and written exams require the ability to present, communicate, discuss and argue; at the oral exam, however, the examinee’s performance takes place in the exam room immediately prior to the assessment. Involvement and commitment are important factors. In that respect, the oral exam is comparable to a lot of real, working-life situations, and thus it may from the outset be regarded as an authentic type of exam. An oral exam is a particularly condensed event. To all the involved parties, students and examiners alike, the time limit plays a significant role.

Oral exams do not form a limited genre within the existing exam types. An exam may or may not involve drawing a question or topic, it may or may not include preparation time, it may consist mainly of a student presentation, involve much or little dialogue, have one or more participants\(^1\), and it may or may not include material (text, picture or other). Oral exams may be part of or serve as the conclusion of a long process that also includes a written product prepared by the student, for example in the case of an oral exam that follows the preparation of a project or a dissertation. However, the oral exam can also be an isolated event, making the student’s performance at the exam the only basis of assessment.

The oral exam may contain an element of luck and coincidence exceeding that of other types of exam. That is the case when students at an oral exam draw the question or the topic they are to discuss, with or without preparation time. It is, however, not to the same extent the case at oral exams based on a product that the students have prepared either individually or in groups. In such cases, only the questions asked by the examiners give rise to spontaneous situations. Different types of student tackle such situations in different ways, and exam nerves, level of self-confidence as well as personal appearance may have an impact at the oral exam.\(^2\) However, the formal

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\(^1\) In Denmark, group exams have been almost completely abolished since 2006, except in special courses where the examinees have to appear together to carry through their performance.

\(^2\) EVA (2003): “Self-evaluations indicate that the oral exam is most suitable for self-confident students that are not afraid to be the centre of attention.”
framework of oral exams is no different from that of other types of exam. This means that examinees must be assessed equally and fairly in relation to the objectives. The more equal and fair it is possible to make oral exams, the higher their quality. The objective of this section is to list a number of factors that may play a part in improving the quality of oral exams.

7.2 Roles
To make the exam work, it is vital that all parties have agreed in advance on the distribution of roles played by respectively the student, the examiner and the second examiner. The students are responsible of giving their best possible performance; that particular role does not present any problems. However, giving the students an additional role may constitute a problem. Many teachers think that students perform their best if they get the chance to show that they can control the exam. As a result, they tell their students that if they want to get high grades, they must demonstrate their ability to take charge of the examination.

This is not the students’ responsibility. Being in charge of the examination is the examiner’s role. The exam serves as an investigation aimed at providing the most accurate and informative basis possible for the assessment. The examiner’s job is to provide the student with an opportunity to demonstrate the extent to which he/she is able to meet the stipulated objectives, and to uncover any shortcomings in that respect.

Usually the examiner asks the majority of the questions, whereas the second examiner may add comments and make suggestions as to the themes that he or she feels should be discussed. However, unless this has been agreed in advance, the second examiner should not take over the examination for longer or shorter periods. Due to the examiner’s role as the interviewer, it will be natural for the second examiner to take extensive notes during the exam.3

The second examiner is the official supervisor, which means that he or she must ensure that the exam follows correct procedure. The second examiner must make sure that all examinees are assessed equally and fairly; this includes ensuring that the examiner treats all students equally, that they get approximately the same time etc. In addition, the second examiner must make sure that the basis for assessment is correct, i.e. that a proper description of the objectives of the exam is in place, that an assessment whether the students

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3 See s 8 of the examinations order: During their assessment, both examiners must take notes on the student’s performance and how the grade has been determined, with a view to a possible complaint. The notes must be kept for at least one year, and until any complaints case has been finalised.
meet the objectives is possible, and that the description of objectives provides guidelines for both the exam and the assessment.

Finally, the second examiner must check that the examiners are capable of making the appropriate assessments, i.e. that they possess the appropriate academic qualifications, that they have read any written works included in the assessment etc. In this respect, the second examiner is also supposed to assess him- or herself.

### 7.3 Questions and interviewing techniques: the successful exam interview

A very important, contributing factor to the quality of oral exams is the questions. Interviewing technique is not only a matter of phrasing questions, but also of how questions are organised into themes and how the interview develops or progresses. Good questions are asked at the right moment. In addition, a vital element of the interviewing technique is the body language and the tone of voice that accompany the questions and create a trustful and appreciative interview atmosphere in which the student’s knowledge and skills are not overlooked or disturbed by insecurity, nerves or misguided communication. In addition, it is imperative to understand that the exam situation is also a forum where good questions are defined as providing the opportunity to give a good answer, not necessarily “the right answer”, but an answer that illustrates the boundaries between what the student knows and does not know.

The questions asked must be understandable to the student. They must be phrased in clear and simple language. Questions must take their outset in assumptions, premises and facts that the examiner and the examinee have in common. Questions must be worded clearly and logically and must not be ambiguous to the effect that the examinee risks wasting time and efforts contemplating why the question has been phrased in a particular way. Where in ordinary conversation it is common and natural to ask for clarification or elaboration if a question has not been understood, it may in the exam situation require quite some courage on the part of the student to admit that he or she has not understood a question, even if it deals with the communication proper.

#### 7.3.1 Open and closed questions

Theoretically, it is possible to distinguish between many different types of question. Due to the focus in recent years on coaching and counselling, many people have encountered some of these types without necessarily having come across any overall or general classification. In the exam situation, it is important that the questions asked open a possibility for the examinee to

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4 The obligations of the second examiner are further described in Chapter 16 on grading and feedback.
unfold his or her knowledge. Consequently, it is useful to operate with the paired concepts of open and closed questions. Open questions call for detailed answers, explanation or justification, whereas closed questions allow only a limited, already defined range of answers. At the same time, open and neutral questions are not leading, but allow answers to be representative and reflective, and they do not offer a closed range of options to the other party. Closed questions turn the exam into an oral type of multiple choice test, or, particularly in the case of yes-no questions, an interrogation. As an exam technique, obviously, open questions are generally more suitable than closed questions, but this does not mean that it is always possible to completely avoid closed questions. They may be useful in follow-up phases when the framework of a theme or an issue has been clearly established.

The following question is a specific example of how closed questions can be a matter of guessing what is on the examiner’s mind: *What term does Luhmann use for that phenomenon?* Here, the examiner wants one, correct answer. The right answer is the term that the examiner has read about in Luhmann and is thinking of at that particular moment. In the examiner’s world, he or she is discussing a certain phenomenon with the student. However, the student does not necessarily share that opinion and may give a wrong answer to the question because he or she thinks that a different phenomenon has been discussed in the examination. A wrong answer does not have to be an indication that the student has not read Luhmann. But the examiner will probably be unaware of that. Such a situation is very unpleasant for the student. At that point, the examination is not about what the student knows; he or she needs to guess what the examiner is actually asking, knowing that it is crucial to make the right guess. In this situation, the brave student will survive by asking: *Which phenomenon are you referring to?* The examiner has not made sure that the question is based on common assumptions, premises and facts. The common perceptions are much more important when asking closed questions than in the case of open questions.

However, not all questions are either open or closed. Below are examples of how it is possible to gradually open a question. A slightly more open wording could be: *How does Luhmann explain that phenomenon?* Or even more open: *How would Luhman explain that phenomenon?* And yet more open, explicitly offering the student the opportunity to present a personal angle of his or her knowledge: *Using Luhmann’s terms, how would you explain the phenomenon?* An entirely open question, offering the student the opportunity to select from his or her knowledge and structure the answer: *How do you explain that phenomenon?* As a follow-up, the examiner can ask more closed and specific questions about Luhmann’s terms or explanations. The latter option presents several advantages:
1. When the examiner asks the student to explain the phenomenon, he or she does not put the student in a situation where it is a question of correct or not. As a result, the student will probably not spend much effort on guessing but rather on providing a good and coherent explanation.

2. It will very soon be obvious from the student’s explanation whether the examiner’s and the student’s perception of the phenomenon match.

3. The student gets the opportunity on his or her own initiative either to use (academic) terms in their explanation, or – if they are not able to do so – give a common sense explanation. Whatever the case, the student is being challenged to give an answer that may serve as a valuable indicator in the final assessment.

The complexity of how closed or open questions are may be illustrated by the following examples which could be said to be hidden closed questions. A case from the National Social Appeals Board is used at a legal exam, and the examiner asks: What was the citizen’s argumentation? The student answers by referring to the citizen’s arguments, but the examiner is not entirely satisfied and repeats the question: What was his argumentation? The student elaborates on her answer. The examiner, however, is still not satisfied and asks: Yes, and what principle is that? At this point it is obvious that the first question is more closed than would appear from its wording. The examiner is after a legal principle, but asks (in a broader sense) about the citizen’s argumentation, which does not build on legal principles. The student answers the question she is asked, but in the examiner’s opinion her answer is inaccurate/wrong.

Hidden, closed questions must be an object of dread to all examinees. Having to guess what the examiner wants to hear is enough of an ordeal, but when the question is concealed in an apparently more open question, it becomes almost impossible to sit an oral exam.

7.3.2 Abstract versus specific questions

Another relevant distinction may be drawn between abstract and specific questions. Both abstract and specific questions can be open as well as closed. Abstract questions deal with abstract phenomena such as principles, theoretical regularity etc. As a rule, it will be academically more demanding to answer abstract questions. Specific questions can only be answered if you possess the specific knowledge.

Below is an example of how an examiner at an exam in EU law asks gradually more specific questions when the student is unable to provide satisfactory answers to the abstract questions: You mention the Grogan decision on abortion. Can you explain why the Irish ban on advertisements of abortion clinics is not a
violation of EU law? The student hesitates and mutters under his breath. – *Just take your time!* However, more time does not help, as the answer still does not emerge. As a result, the examiner asks a more specific question: *What regulations should the Irish ban be compared to?* When the student still does not provide a satisfactory answer, the examiner becomes entirely specific and takes a practical angle: *Let me ask you a slightly different question: What would be the reaction of the European Court if British abortion clinics advertised in Ireland?*

When the above in our opinion is a very good exam technique, this is due to the fact that the questions grow less demanding as the student cannot answer (or gives poor answers): A number of different legal principles are in play in this example, among those the single market principle. The first question gives the student ample opportunity to list all relevant circumstances and explain the underlying principles behind Ireland being allowed to ban advertising of abortion clinics. The *why* question leads directly to an explanation. The second question is considerably more specific; the student is asked to list the regulations that apply. The examiner does not ask for explanations, but for knowledge. As several regulations apply, the student has the opportunity to select a starting point for his answer and perhaps raise it to a more abstract level by describing how the different regulations do not work in the same direction. The third question directly asks for the regulations pertaining to the issue (a higher degree of ready knowledge than in the case of the second question). The change from the second to the third question also provides a shift from a partly open to a closed question.

### 7.4 Exam phases

It is useful to divide the exam into phases serving each their purpose: An initial phase, a central phase and a final phase. The phases are not equally long. At a 20-minute oral exam, time must be deducted for discussion, feedback and students getting in and out of the exam room, which means that the time for the actual exam is reduced to about 15 minutes. The 15 minutes could be distributed as follows: Start 3 minutes, central phase 9 minutes and final phase 3 minutes.\(^5\)

In the initial phase, the most important element is to play down the situation. Many students are unduly nervous, and the intention is not to have them perform under extreme conditions. It will thus often be useful to start by asking general, broad questions or, by means of a question or an invitation, just allow the student to begin. Some exam descriptions or degree regulations

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\(^5\) In some disciplines, the oral exam has already been divided into phases in the degree regulations because different competencies need to be tested. This could be exams in language disciplines, communicative disciplines or skills-based disciplines, where the exam consists of reading, discussion of various texts or translation, or exams where different sub-fields are tested separately.
provide that the student should start by giving a presentation of a certain duration.

Students tend to perceive specific questions as very tough questions that they risk answering incorrectly, and general questions as soft questions they can talk themselves out of by being evasive. However, answers to general questions are just as indicative of what the students know or do not know as specific, narrow questions.

In the central phase, the examination should normally deal with the topics the student wants to talk about as well as other themes. This means that the examiner must be able to move the student from the “home ground” to the “away ground”. In order to make the examination proceed smoothly, the examiner may benefit from having written down a number of questions in advance. The written questions must not, however, have the effect that the examiner is so focused on asking all the questions that he or she neglects to ask elaborating questions. Elaborating questions are vitally important to allow the examiner to find the limits of a student’s performance. However, elaborating questions are often used to a different end, namely as a tool to emphasise the student’s performance. If elaborating questions are to serve as an assessment tool (as indeed they are), the following principle must be adhered to: If you get good answers, increase the complexity of your questions. If you get poor answers, lower the complexity. Experience shows that many examiners do the opposite.

In the final phase, a suitable tool to get the best conditions for assessment is to ask the student if there are themes that have not been touched upon at the exam, but which he or she finds important. If there are, it is an excellent opportunity to discuss one of the themes. At the same time, it gives the student the opportunity to demonstrate his or her general knowledge and overview of the issue.

7.5 Use of oral exams: an example using video recording
The oral exam is suitable for many types of performance and for working with different competencies. If students’ oral communication in a specific area or in general is important, an oral exam is to be preferred. The point is that there must be correlation between the desired competencies and the type of exam. However, an oral exam also requires that regular classes involve oral skills in some form and to some extent, that preparation is discussed, and that clear guidelines for the exam are in place. This is particularly the case of the example below, which includes the practice applied in the pertinent discipline. This is done by using video recordings as a basis of the students’ analyses and reflection on an internship, in the present case in a doctor’s
surgery, as part of the medical studies at Aarhus University. The exam in general practice is conducted as an oral exam at the conclusion of the 10th semester. It consists of three elements:

1) a video-recorded surgery visit and an accompanying written report;
2) an oral exam based on the recording and the clinical problem;
3) a theoretical, secondary question either from the textbook or relating to social medicine.

Ten days before the first exam day the student hands in an unedited video recording of a surgery situation as well as an analysis form that deals with both the biomedical aspect and the surgery situation. The examination starts with a joint viewing of the video recording. Following the playback, there is an oral examination based on the pertinent issue and the student’s own analysis of the surgery situation, during which an examiner tries in more general terms to uncover the student’s knowledge about the discipline general medicine. Finally the student is examined in a theoretical subject in clinical social medicine.

At the assessment, the examiners pay particular attention to the examinee’s ability to emphasise the issues relevant to understanding the patient’s problem, describing the patient’s notions, expectations and fears as well as elaborating on, examining and treating the health problems illustrated in the video. This exam includes a student-prepared paper that makes it possible to emphasise specific, practical application of knowledge (the examinee’s ability to apply his or her general medical knowledge and to have an adequate dialogue with the patient). Quite specifically, it draws the student’s practice into the exam room and allows for both reflection and testing of knowledge.

7.6 A demanding type of exam

The oral exam is a classic and useful type of exam that serves as a source of learning to many students, particularly when it is constructively prepared and incorporated in teaching and learning objectives. The oral exam is very dependent on the examiner’s conscious efforts on both learning objectives and interview technique at the exam. This means that examiners need further training if the standing of the oral exam is to be maintained and its reliability enhanced. The oral exam is under pressure, mainly due to financial conditions and low reliability. Not much can be done about the economy. The minimum standard for oral exams at universities is 20 minutes. Reducing the minimum examination time would be completely irresponsible, just as it would be unacceptable to eliminate the participation of a second examiner. However, both validity and reliability may be increased by including learning objectives more explicitly in both examination and assessment and by making examiners better equipped to handle dialogue with the students.
Learning objectives will often be too abstractly phrased to be used directly as questions. But they can be used as strategic indicators of the themes that need to be brought up as questions. This way they may influence both the questions that the examiner has prepared in advance, and the elaborating questions that the dialogue with the student leads to. Good exam practices in this context equals upholding the learning objectives in the dialogue rather than using the student’s answers to make the student consider more or less exotic and peripheral themes.