From Essay to Evaluative Conversation
Unlocking the power of viva voce assessment for undergraduates

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YOUR PRESENTER

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Research fields
• Higher Education policy and practice
• Oral Assessment
• Self-Assessment and Academic Self-Efficacy

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OUTLINE

1. Introduction to viva voce assessment and wider context
2. Implementing viva voce assessment: my experience
3. Evaluation and Research of 2017-18 and 2018-19 data
4. Developments and plans post Covid-19
Introduction to viva voce assessment and wider context
I am Italian and I trained at an Italian University

**Backward:**
Teaching practice in Italy was more didactic

**Forward:**
For the majority of disciplines, every final exam is composed of a written + viva voce component. I believe the viva voce component is what shapes Italian students’ critical ability and discussion skills.

I strongly believe we should make better use of viva voce assessment.
VIVA VOCE ASSESSMENT

**Uncommon**

Stray (2001) – Traditional shift from oral to written exams in UK
Hounsell et al. (2007) – Why is it not used at UG level?

Few examples: Nursing (Davis & Engward, 2018), Dentistry (Ganji, 2017), Business Studies (Pearce & Lee, 2009), Education (Carless, 2002), Mathematics (Iannone & Simpson, 2012)

**Unresearched**

Dobson (2008) – not conceptualised in literature

**Needed**

EconomicsNetwork Surveys (2018-20)
→ communication to non-economists
→ creativity and imaginative ability
When I interview graduates for a job at ONS, I do not look at their technical skills to begin with. I just ask myself: “Can I send this person to go and brief the Prime Minister about the most recent economic statistics in six months from now?”

Jonathan Athow
Deputy National Statistician and Director General,
Economic Statistics at Office for National Statistics
Former Advisory Board Member, Economics@UEA
A presentation is not a viva voce – power dynamics are different

Authenticity → what could be closer to a job interview?

Reflect on where you want to position your assessment.
Implementing viva voce assessment: my experience
HISTORY of ECONOMIC THOUGHT

Context: UG Year 2 optional module, popular with PPE students

Enrolment: 70 students in 2017-18, 50 students in 2018-19

Delivery: lectures (reading and commenting original texts) 
seminars (more readings, ideally student-led)

Content: Petty, Smith, Ricardo, Marx, Bentham, Mill & Marginalists, 
Hayek & Austrians, Keynes, Friedman, McCloskey, Sudgen

Challenges: non-technical, so tests and exams are pointless
want to develop critical thinking, ability to discuss, 
see the bigger picture, express through different media.
ASSESSMENT DESIGN

1 (30%)
group video presentation

2 (40%)
individual critical essay

3 (30%)
individual evaluative conversation

feed-forward
engaging students process, not end-point
Carless & Boud (2018)
Winstone & Carless (2019)

using different media to communicate
developing research and critical skills
engaging in discussion - interview skills
HOW TO DO IT? Video-Presentation

1. Allocate students in groups and let them choose a topic

2. Set group allocation on VLE

3. Provide guidelines on free-software (e.g. OBS Studio, iMovie)

4. Students create video-presentation or screencast and upload on VLE

6. Videos are marked on VLE through rubric and feedback

7. Create a Wiki with all videos on VLE for students to share.
HOW TO DO IT? Essay

1. Students choose a topic and discuss it with me

2. Students submit their work on VLE in MSWord format

3. Scripts are annotated in MSWord + rubric + mark on VLE

4. Final comments include directions for the Evaluative Conversation
   - addressing in-text comments
   - expanding on the issues covered in the essay
   - making a link to another theory/thinker

5. Students receive their feedback and prepare for the conversation.
HOW TO DO IT? Evaluative Conversation

1. Block time-slots according to need

2. Set shared Excel with time-slots, linked to VLE

3. Students book their conversation slot, email to confirm

4. Evaluative Conversation: 15-20mins + 10 minutes to write feedback
   - recording on laptop camera and microphone
   - 1st part discussing essay feed-forward, 2nd part on entire syllabus
   - taking notes + marking crib + marking rubric agreed with students

5. Upload recording and marking crib/rubric on
   VLE add short feedback sentence and final mark.
HOW TO DO IT? Evaluative Conversation

Making Rubric co-created with students and reviewed periodically (simplified senate scale)

Response to Feedback: discussing the essay
Critical Ability: depth of knowledge
Flexibility and Responsiveness: breadth of knowledge
Exposition Clarity and Quality: using appropriate jargon
Confidence: attitude during conversation
## HOW TO DO IT? Evaluative Conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Student Response</th>
<th>Needed Prompting?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Fair</td>
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</table>
HOW TO DO IT?  Evaluative Conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response to Feedback from Critical Essay</th>
<th>High 1st (80-100)</th>
<th>1st (70-79)</th>
<th>2:1 (60-69)</th>
<th>2:2 (50-59)</th>
<th>3rd (40-49)</th>
<th>Mg Fail (30-39)</th>
<th>Fail (below 30)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback received was fully and satisfactorily acted upon.</td>
<td>Feedback received was fully and satisfactorily acted upon.</td>
<td>Feedback received was fully and satisfactorily acted upon.</td>
<td>Feedback received was only partially acted upon.</td>
<td>Feedback received was marginally acted upon and addressed.</td>
<td>Feedback received was not acted upon.</td>
<td>Feedback received was not acted upon in its entirety.</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is presence of additional research related to the specific issues raised in the feedback. This is supplemented by additional original and critical contributions.</td>
<td>There is presence of additional research related to the specific issues raised in the feedback.</td>
<td>There might be minor gaps in knowledge.</td>
<td>There might be gaps in knowledge and unresolved issues.</td>
<td>There are substantive gaps in knowledge and unresolved issues.</td>
<td>There is no reference to additional material, or references provided are not pertinent.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexibility and Critical Ability</td>
<td>The conversation moved across different topics and theories reasonably well.</td>
<td>The conversation moved across different topics and theories but needed a few prompts.</td>
<td>The conversation moved across different topics and theories but needed several prompts.</td>
<td>The conversation had to be entirely led by the module convenor.</td>
<td>Only a few responses could be deemed as accurate.</td>
<td>The conversation was flawed by major gaps in preparation. Several questions remained unanswered.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>All responses were consistent and exhaustive. They displayed excellent critical ability.</td>
<td>Responses were competent and exhaustive. They displayed good critical ability, with very minor hesitations.</td>
<td>Responses were reasonably accurate. There was some evidence of critical considerations, but with hesitations.</td>
<td>Responses were mostly accurate, with some imprecisions. There was limited evidence of critical ability.</td>
<td>The student could correct themselves through prompt, but with hesitation. There was very limited evidence of critical ability.</td>
<td>Many responses were imprecise and not accurate. The student was very hesitant. There was no display of critical ability.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Exposition Quality and Clarity</td>
<td>The student used appropriate terminology. They were able to contextualise and logically organise information. Their exposition was professional and focused.</td>
<td>The student mostly used appropriate terminology. They were often able to contextualise and logically organise information. Their exposition was almost always professional, clear, and focused.</td>
<td>The student was only partially able to use appropriate terminology. Their ability to contextualise and logically organise information was limited. Their exposition was at times unclear and/or affected by shortcomings.</td>
<td>The student was mostly unable to use appropriate terminology. They mostly lacked ability to contextualise and logically organise information. Their exposition might have lacked clarity and was affected by significant shortcoming.</td>
<td>The student was unable to use appropriate terminology. They lacked ability to contextualise and logically organise information. Their exposition was unclear and problematic.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student was completely comfortable and pro-active during the conversation. They established good eye contact and sympathy with the lecturer.</td>
<td>The student was comfortable during the conversation.</td>
<td>The student was reasonably comfortable during the conversation, even though not always in control. They might have displayed some doubt and hesitation.</td>
<td>The student managed to hold some control over the conversation, but they were doubt and hesitation. They might have displayed a rushed, evasive, and indecisive attitude.</td>
<td>The student was not in control of the whole conversation and had to be guided. They might have displayed a rushed, evasive, and indecisive attitude.</td>
<td>The student was silent unless prompted across the whole conversation. They might have displayed clear signs of indecisiveness.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The student was mostly insensitive for the whole duration of the conversation. They might have displayed indecisiveness and inability to interact.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RE-FRAMING THE ASSESSMENT SPACE

School of Economics
my office
RE-FRAMING THE ASSESSMENT SPACE

School of Economics

my office
RE-FRAMING THE ASSESSMENT SPACE

In a **socially-distanced world** transferring Evaluative Conversations online was very simple.

2019-20 meetings booked on Zoom and recordings uploaded on the VLE.

I found that students felt more at ease not being physically present in the room with me.

Discussing the essay feedback could be done sharing the essay document on screen.

**Evaluative Conversations are hardly subject to risk of plagiarism.**
QA and FAIRNESS – provocations

• According to the evidence by Stray (2001) we might be biased against viva voce assessment → we are not used to conceptualise it

• If we are concerned about bias in viva voce assessment, what about presentations? Shall we remove these too?

• If we are concerned about bias in any dialogue with our students, should we remove office hours? Should we conduct them anonymously?

• Are essays or (worse) hand-written exams bias-proof?

• Is the decolonising the curriculum agenda bias-proof?
QA and FAIRNESS – risk management

- Viva voce assessments are recorded and uploaded on VLE. They are accessible by students, marker, moderator, external examiners.

- Marking-Crib and Marking-Rubric keep the process consistent.

- There are risks to students, but also benefits to skill-development → strive to achieve balance.

- Viva voce assessments are much harder to plagiarise. From this perspective, we are preventing bias!

- There is unconscious bias, but there is also goodwill and partnership → we need to be brave, we need to teach students to be brave.
SCALABILITY

How to adjust this process for large classes?

• Consider shortening the time of each viva. We can extract a lot of information within 3-5 minutes.
• Consider focusing on commenting diagrams and data.
• Consider online/offline conversations

How to obtain consistency across different markers?

• calibration is much better than moderation (AdvanceHE)
• assess first 5 conversations as a team
• use marking tools such cribs and rubrics with explicit criteria
• cross-evaluate (e.g. 5mins with each markers rather than 10mins with one)
Evaluation and Research: 2017-18 and 2018-19 data
PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS

- Evaluative conversations allow for a **personal experience**. I dedicated time to each one of my students. I adapted to them, rather than they adapting to me.

- Managing and assessing Evaluative Conversation It might seem a daunting task, but it **does not take any longer than marking an essay**. It is a stimulating and interesting experience too.

- Evaluative Conversations can be implemented observing **Quality Assurance** protocols and facilitating standard moderation and external examining.

- Evaluative Conversations are not anonymous, but Presentations are not either. **Anonymity and unbiasedness are two separate concepts.** Unconscious bias can be addressed by adhering to detailed rubrics.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are students’ perceptions of the viva voce assessment? How can we improve its effectiveness?

How are students acting on feedback received in preparation for the viva? What factors affect this agency?
¬→ with Naomi Winstone (University of Surrey)

What are the barriers and the enablers for a successful implementation of viva voce assessment? How can we support the students preparing for vivas?
¬→ with Paola Iannone (Loughborough University)
DATA COLLECTION & METHODOLOGY

2017-18  simple evaluation – bespoke end-module questionnaire

2018-19  mixed-methods research approach – matched student data: student evaluations, orientation to feedback scale (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010), conversation transcripts, demographics, rubrics, marks

2019-20  Covid-19 disruption - transition to blended-learning assessment moved online – no research

2020-21  improved design – future research planned.
DEMOGRAPHICS  2018-19 data

- Female students: 23%
- Overseas/EU students: 23%
- Non-native speakers: 20%
- Non-Economics students: 13%

N=30  Response Rate = 60%
SUMMARY STATISTICS

Evaluative Conversation 2017-18
positive response = 71%

Evaluative Conversation 2018-19
positive response = 60%
SUMMARY STATISTICS

Overall module evaluation improvement: 72% → 86%

Module evaluation vs Conversation
2018-19: 60% vs 72%
THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Students elaborated on the self-evaluation of their viva voce assessment

Themes emerging:

- anxiety/confidence at performing the task → feeling confident/nervous
- student’s preparation for the task → studying the syllabus selectively
- challenge generated by the task → timing, accuracy, uncertainty understanding questions
- support received to face the task → exemplars, feed-forward, emotional intelligence
# COMBINING THE DATA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-evaluation</th>
<th>anxiety or confidence</th>
<th>preparation</th>
<th>supportive environment</th>
<th>challenge of the task</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>worse than expected</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as expected</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better than expected</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>sum</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...If went well, thanks to you – if didn’t go well, it was my fault...
ORIENTATION TO FEEDBACK

• Scales are reliable
• Scales are not correlated
  → to conversation marks
  → to rubric of feedback transfer

What is happening?
• Is feedback literacy sufficient to understand the questionnaire?
• Cognitive dissonance effect?
• Could I improve my teaching?

Next step:
• Look at correlation with self-evaluation.
The conversation approach helped to trigger memories which I wasn't confident that I had.

I really enjoyed having a follow-up assessment on the critical essay. It gave more meaning to both the essay the EC, as opposed to the usual dumping of concern/knowledge following a submission.

I had left my preparation until later than recommended. [?] I was not confident in my ability to perform. Also, I was stressed before beginning but Fabio's relaxed behaviour and casual talk calmed me down.

I enjoyed the essay writing process as I chose a topic that I found interesting. I also liked the evaluative conversation, as it has improved my ability to take criticism and respond to it.

What I prepared most was not what I was asked about.

It was harder than I expected because you asked a lot of stuff outside the essay feedback.
QUOTES FROM STUDENTS

This was the scariest assessment I ever had.

It didn’t go well, but now I know how to do it.

Suggestions to future students

• Do your readings
• Ensure you are truly interested in it
• Communicate with Fabio

...We need more assessments like this.

Oh, are we already done?
Developments and Plans post Covid-19
HOW TO TRAIN STUDENTS TO VIVAS?

What I have done so far...

• fostered debate during lectures and seminars
• asked students to share opinions about material studied
• pre-assigning questions in seminars and questioning students.

... I have not been entirely satisfied with this

• students are shy and scared, despite seeing value in what we try to do
• a lot of contact-time is spent giving students the time to adjust.
HOW TO TRAIN STUDENTS TO VIVAS?

Eureka moment: assessment is the driver of learning

embed training in scaffolded assessment

H₂O model

skills

knowledge

mini vivas

essay

Evaluative conversation
HOW TO TRAIN STUDENTS TO VIVAS?

- **Week 4**: Offline conversation, 5 min, 5%
- **Week 6**: Online conversation, 5 min, 5%
- **Week 8**: Offline conversation, 5 min, 10%
- **Week 10**: Online conversation, 5 min, 20%
- **Week 14**: Final Evaluative Conversation, 20 min, 30%

**Critical Essay**: 30%
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