

Oral Examination – Turning Formal Assessment Into Individual Learning Experience

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SHORT SUMMARY

Examinations are an often-discussed topic among university lecturers; are exams assessments only or can they be regarded as integrated part of the student's learning experience? This paper presents practices for oral examinations, including their role in combining formal assessment with individual learning experience.

ABSTRACT

One key theme of designing student feedback regards exams as assessments that grade what has already been learnt (i.e. summative feedback) or whether these can be regarded as an integrated part of the student's learning activity (i.e. formative feedback). Based upon our experience with focus on written (and even digital) exams, the aim of this work in progress is to present practices for oral examinations, and to discuss the possibility of turning formal assessments into learning experiences.

The case here is TEK590 Service Management (about 30 students). Written exams, which are common practice, entail hardly any student-lecturer interaction. Oral examination provides new opportunities, but also induces stress among the course participants. A process for oral examination is summarised in Figure 1, where learning ranges from peer learning in groups to a face-to-face contact between students and lecturers.

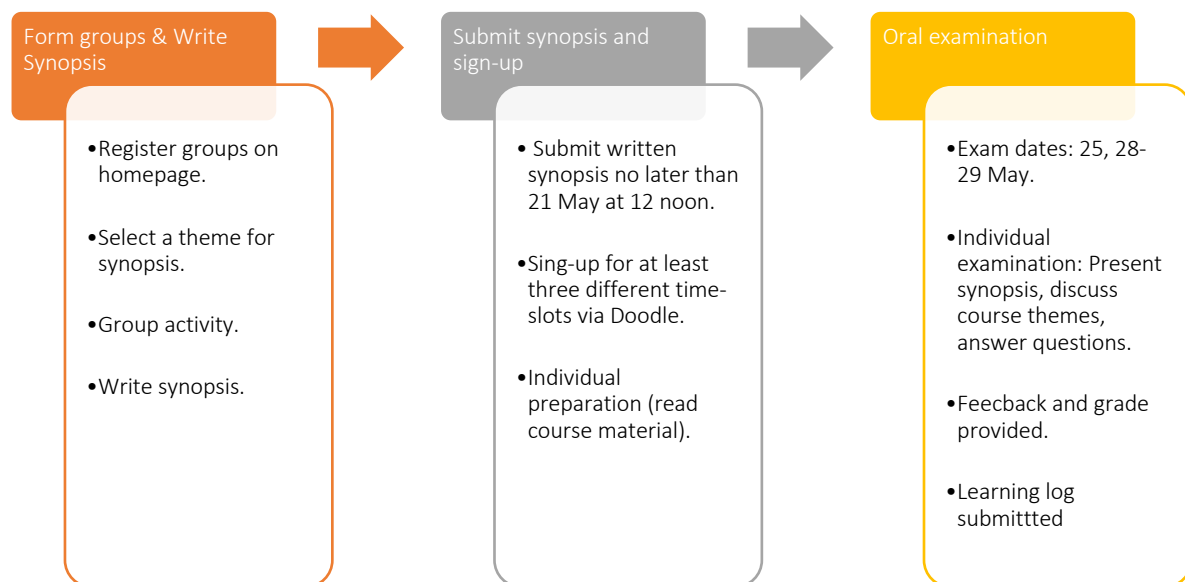


Figure 1. An oral examination process

Form groups and write synopsis: Students form groups of three to jointly work on a synopsis (3-5 pages), from which the student departs at the outset of the exam. The self-chosen topic is structured around: Title; well-motivated problem statement; method/approach; statement on how the problem

statements were answered by using concepts; frameworks and theories from the course literature; the solution; conclusions; and references.

Submission of synopsis and sign-up is done a week before the oral examination. The students prepare by reviewing the course material (articles, slides) and by preparing a short pitch of the synopsis. This is largely an individual activity, but the students are encouraged to make use of study groups.

The *oral examination* is individual, 20 min. per student including examiners' discussion and presentation of grade. The exam was divided into: (1) Students' presentation and discussion of key aspects of the synopsis; (2) Answering a question (drawing one question out of a deck of 10); (3) Broader discussion to cover all central course themes. To enhance the validity of the assessment the course examiner was accompanied by a lecturer acting as a second examiner. Further, an assessment grid was used to relate the student's performance to learning objectives of the course and to the level of learning in terms of Bloom's taxonomy. Two stages of feedback were achieved: a) *formative feedback* (comments on presentation, guided discussion, encourage students to develop new combinations, see new tensions and opportunities); b) *summative feedback* (grade awarding knowledge of theoretical principles from the literature and then related to a particular industrial context, and awareness of the managerial implications of the issues raised). The direct face-to-face interaction with lecturers on both the synopsis, other course topics, and a preformulated question was, albeit stressful in the beginning, highly appreciated by most students. Here the examiners also received feedback from students on the exam. The whole process was completed by a learning log (student self-reflection) submitted after the oral exam, through which the students could express their appreciation of this exam form. Further development concerns the scalability of the oral exam to larger classes and other subjects.
