Teaching toolkits

Oral assessment

Students speak to provide evidence of their learning for assessment. Internationally, oral examinations are commonplace.

We use a wide variety of oral assessment techniques at UCL. Students can be asked to:

- present posters
- use presentation software such as Power Point or Prezi
- perform in a debate
- present a case
- answer questions from teachers or their peers.

Students' knowledge and skills are explored through a dialogue with examiners. Teachers at UCL have found that oral examinations provide students with the scope to demonstrate their detailed understanding of course knowledge and recommend them.

Educational benefits for your students

Good assessment practice gives students the opportunity to demonstrate learning in different ways.

Some students find it difficult to write so they do better in oral assessments. Others may find it challenging to present their ideas to a group of people.

Oral assessment takes account of diversity and enables students to develop vital verbal communication skills.

Marking criteria and guides can be carefully developed so that assessment processes can be quick, simple and transparent.
How to organise oral assessment

Oral assessment can take many forms. Audio and/or video recordings can be uploaded to Moodle if live assessment is not practicable. Tasks can range from individual or group talks and presentations to dialogic oral examinations.

1. Consider the learning you’re aiming to assess

How can you best offer students the opportunity to demonstrate that learning? The planning process needs to start early because students must know about and practise the assessment tasks you design.

2. Inform the students of the criteria

Discuss the assessment criteria with students, ensuring that you include (but don’t overemphasise) presentation or speaking skills. Identify activities which encourage the application or analysis of knowledge. You could choose from the options below or devise a task with a practical element adapted to students’ learning in your discipline.

3. Decide what kind of oral assessment to use

Options for oral assessment can include:
- Assessment task
- Presentation
- Talk
- Debate
- Role-play
- Interview
- Dialogue
- Question and answer session.

Individual or group
If group, how will you distribute the tasks and the marks?

Combination with other modes of assessment
- Oral presentation of a project report or dissertation.
- Oral presentation of posters, diagrams, or museum objects.
- Commentary on a practical exercise.
- Questions to follow up written tests, examinations, or essays.

Decide on the weighting of the different assessment tasks and clarify how the assessment criteria will be applied to each.

Peer or staff assessment or a combination: groups of students can assess other groups or individuals.
How to organise oral assessment

4. Brief your students

When you’ve decided which options to use, provide students with detailed information.

Integrate opportunities to develop the skills needed for oral assessment progressively as students learn.

If you can involve students in formulating assessment criteria, they will be motivated and engaged and gain insight into what is required, especially if examples are used.

5. Planning, planning planning!

Plan the oral assessment event meticulously.

Stick rigidly to planned timing.

Ensure that students practise presentations with time limitations in mind. Allow time between presentations or interviews and keep presentations brief.

6. Decide how you will evaluate

Decide how you will evaluate presentations or students’ responses.

It works well to create an assessment sheet with a grid or table using the relevant assessment criteria.

Focus on core learning outcomes avoiding detail.

Two assessors must be present to:

• evaluate against a range of specific core criteria
• focus on forming a holistic judgment.

Leave time to make a final decision on marks perhaps after every four presentations.

Refer to audio recordings later for borderline cases.

7. Use peers to assess presentations

Students will learn from presentations especially if you can use ‘audio/video recall’ for feedback.

Let speakers talk through aspects of the presentation pointing out areas they might develop. Then discuss your evaluation with them. This can also be done in peer groups.

If you have large groups of students, they can support each other, each providing feedback to several peers. They can use the same assessment sheets as teachers. Marks can also be awarded for feedback.

8. Use peer review

A great advantage of oral assessment is that learning can be shared and peer reviewed, in line with academic practice.

There are many variants on the theme so why not let your students benefit from this underused form of assessment?
Where to find help and support

arena@ucl.ac.uk: contact the UCL Arena Centre

We have a range of assessment and feedback toolkits on the Teaching and Learning Portal, including:

• 6 key steps to develop good feedback
• Assessing group work
• Assessing students multimedia assignments
• Assessment and feedback resources
• Enhancing and giving quicker feedback
• Guided marking
• Helping students understand assessment
• Oral assessment
• Peer assessment
• Preparing students for exams using feedback
• TESTA (Transforming experience of students through assessment)
• Using proformas for feedback

bit.ly/AssessmentFeedbackResources: to access an online guide for assessment and feedback resources.

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