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Professional speed date: a new method for efficient oral examination

Oral exams have great potential in improving oral communication skills of the students and they also test different kinds of skills than traditional written exams. One major obstacle preventing wider use of oral exams is that evaluation of the performance may be affected by the relationship between the student and teacher, and even for some inappropriate reasons such as the sex or appearance of the student. To avoid these possible biases, oral exams will need the presence of more than one teacher. This, however, means that oral exams will be very laborious. Here we present a new kind of oral exam, namely the Professional speed date which, to great extent, solves the above mentioned problems related to oral exams. Professional speed date is easy to organize, fast to pursue and due to its peer-evaluation system, minimally affected by personal relationships between teacher and the students. The exam is most likely especially useful in pre-course or mid-term exams where the purpose is to test the general knowledge level of a large group of students. Our own experiences using the exam have been positive, and none of the students involved have reported any major problems with the procedure. Most students have informed that compared to the traditional written exam they prefer this innovative type of testing their knowledge level.

Introduction

Oral examination is under represented in higher education even though its benefits have been repeatedly shown (Burke-Smalley, 2014; Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Different kinds of written exams are dominantly used most likely due to their easiness from the teacher's point of view (Walker & Thompson, 2001). One of the most positive things about oral exams is that they prepare students for real-life situations like job interviews, meetings or to give a speech among others (Darling & Dannels, 2003). It is more likely that students will be evaluated in the future by their oral rather than their writing communication skills. Therefore, it is very important that they improve their oral skills.

However, there are also some problems associated to oral exams. For example, high level of stress can affect students' performance and cause bias in evaluation. Students may consider oral examinations more stressful than written exams because of the need to provide immediate answers to the questions. Some may also feel more intimidated to give a potentially wrong face to face answer to the teacher. Moreover, even if the teachers try to be as objective as possible during the oral exams they may unconsciously be discriminating against students e.g. with poor language skill. It is well known that there are common linguistic (Clavero, 2010), gender (Tregenza, 2002) and geographical (Wong & Kokko, 2005) biases during evaluation processes.

One of the major challenges considering oral exams where each student is individually examined is their laboriousness. In a typical oral exam 20–30 minutes are allocated for each student, easily summing up to several days of examination already with 20 students. An alternative is to organize oral exams for groups of students. This is less time-consuming but evaluating individual performance becomes difficult. Indeed, an oral exam that could be organized for larger number of students in short time and enabling grading each student's own skills and knowledge level is called upon. In this paper we describe a new kind of oral exam which we call the *Professional speed date* that overcomes previous problems of oral exams while providing students with useful oral communication skills. We report our own experiences based on testing the protocol on two different courses, namely *Biogeography* and *Ecology*, both belonging to Master degree curriculum of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology program in University of Jyväskylä, Finland. In our opinion the exam is useful to teach the students oral communication skills and to test and enhance their learning in an efficient manner. The exam is most likely especially useful in pre-course and mid-term exams where the purpose is to test if the students have acquired enough skills to carry on with the curriculum.

Exam protocol

The main advantage of the proposed exam is that in *Professional speed date* the students are dating with each other

instead of the teachers. The teacher prepares questions beforehand, organizes students in randomly selected groups and supervises the examination, where the performance of students is then peer-evaluated by the fellow students. Below we explain how this can be done so that maximum equality between the students is achieved.

Our example

The example protocol is useful for 12 students, or 24 students organized in two separate classrooms. The protocol can easily be revised for a different number of students by changing the number of groups or questions. We started by preparing exam questions on four themes. We had six questions for each theme. We numbered the questions within each theme so that questions 1–3 were more specific and questions 4–6 more general. The questions were made equally difficult and their overlap was minimized. We gave each student a printed question sheet. We then divided the students into groups of three people, and placed them to tables, which had been positioned in the examination room as shown in figure 1. The students were given the following instructions:

The purpose of the exam is that you test each other's performance and learning. You will answer those questions where number matches the numbers on your position at the table. One seat at each table is numbered 1&4, one 2&5 and one 3&6. The first period of the oral exam starts when the student sitting on the yellow site (figure 1) answers question number one. The questionnaire continues until all six questions have been answered. You have five minutes time to communicate each question. The time will be controlled by the teacher and he/she will indicate when to move forward to the next question. This means that the group of three students has 30 minutes in total to cover all six questions. In this oral exam the performance is evaluated by the other students, namely the two other students with whom you discuss the questions. Each question is answered by one student at the time and evaluated by the other two students. The evaluation is done in three categories:

- *"Needs more knowledge/reading": if the answer has been poorly formulated*
- *"Enough knowledge/reading": if the answer has been satisfactory*
- *"Very good knowledge": if the student have shown deep understanding of the topic*

After 30 minutes students seated at numbers 1&4 will stay put. Students seated at 2&5 move clockwise and students seated at 3&6 move counterclockwise to the next table. After changing positions another theme follows. After two themes there will be a break followed by two more themes. The exam will be over in roughly two hours when each of you has answered 8 questions and received 16 peer-evaluations from fellow students.

Benefits of the method in comparison with other exam types based on our own experience and student feedback

1. Students have the opportunity to practice and improve their oral skills which is a key skill in job interviews and many other aspects in their future careers.
2. Discussing a topic is a better way of learning than studying things alone and writing down specific answers because communicating enables reflecting your ideas.

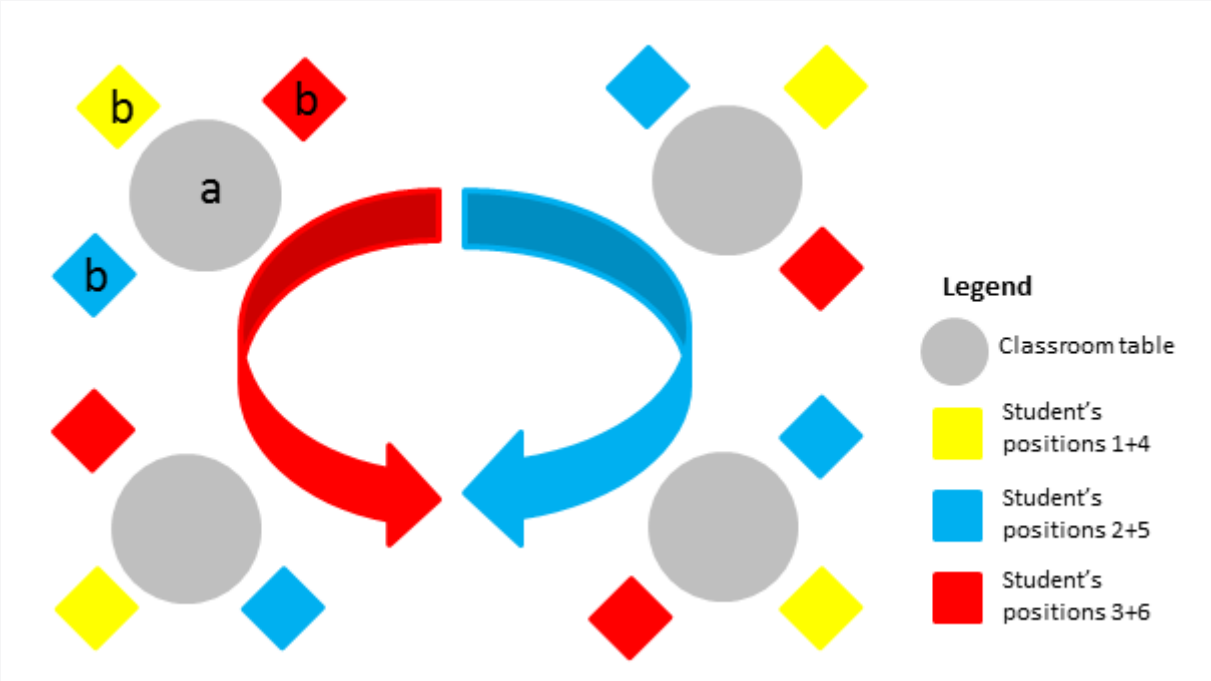

Figure 1. The examination room is organized in tables (a) seated for three students. Students´ positions (b) are numbered with the question numbers that each student must answer. Students seated at numbers 1+4 (yellow) stay seated when theme changes whereas students seated at 2+5 (blue) move clockwise and students seated at 3+6 (red) move counterclockwise. This guarantees a perfect group mixture each time when theme changes (with the number of students giving the upper limit for potential number of new mixtures).

Oral discussion also allows immediate feedback.

3. Oral exams are more motivating. In written exam it would be too easy to give up whereas oral exam pushes you to test your limit.
4. Students are peer-evaluated so they will likely be more relaxed during the exam than if the evaluator would be a teacher. Relaxed atmosphere encourages to express own ideas more bravely and deeply, and ask for immediate feedback from peers to facilitate own future learning
5. Multiple questions and multiple evaluators enhance objective evaluation. Each student will answer both specific and general questions enabling balanced evaluation. Personal bias is reduced because students receive evaluations from several, randomly selected peer.
6. Interacting with peers on the first day of the course can promote more interaction between students. It is a good way of breaking the ice and getting to know each other.

Potential problems and risks

There is obviously a risk that the students evaluate their friends more generously than other students, yielding a situation where socially active students and fellow classmates from earlier courses get better grades than others. We did not detect any problems related to this phenomenon. We believe that the fact that the teacher is supervising the examination pushes the students to be as objective as possible in their evaluations. It would be highly interesting to study this potential phenomenon in more detail to see if it is present.

Another potential problem may be that the exam does not fit all the disciplines. For example, it may be difficult to use this as an exam in disciplines which need detailed calculations. On the other hand, grading the discussion may demand other techniques in disciplines such as philosophy where the quality of exam answer is based on the argumentation itself. We believe that if properly used and perhaps further developed, our method could be particularly useful in such disciplines.

Potential extensions of the method

Often it is very difficult to make students to engage in active discussion during scientific seminars (Svinhufvud, 2015) even though this is strongly encouraged (Interaction in the seminar 2004–2010). The lack of interaction may, for example, be the result of the students´ fear to show their incompetence along with their comments, or merely due to the fact that there is no actual room for free discussion (Svinhufvud, 2015). Speed-date oral exam approach can be used to encourage discussion during seminars. We suggest trialing student seminar sessions where the author presenting the work or teacher at the course has prepared a few questions to guide discussion, and the discussion is then arranged in the speed date format. This would encourage especially the junior students to practice discussion and facilitate learning of the subject matter. Sessions may well conclude with general discussion among all participants.

In some cases it could be more beneficial to have a wider range of evaluation categories than the three that we used. Some students mentioned in their feedback that because they are used to get grades on scale 1–5, it would have been easier for them to use similar grades on this exam too.

Conclusions

Above we have presented a new method for oral examination, and if extended, also for other kinds of discussions related to higher education. According to our own experience, and also many others (Laurinen, Luukka & Sajavaara, 1996; Svinhufvud, 2015), the lack of discussion is a massive problem in higher education so we should be actively seeking methods to improve the situation. We hope that our method is a usable additional to teacher' tool box. As a concluding remark, a quote from our students:

> *Speed dating was such a powerful experience that we remember the topics of the different themes really well. We regarded the exam especially good and usable even though somewhat stressful beforehand. We welcome similar exams to our future courses too.*

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