



Revitalizing Assessment

Exploring the benefits and challenges of Viva Voce

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In undergraduate and postgraduate taught programs, traditional modes of assessments like student presentations, essays, blogs or reflective writing and written exams in some cases - are far more common than viva voces.

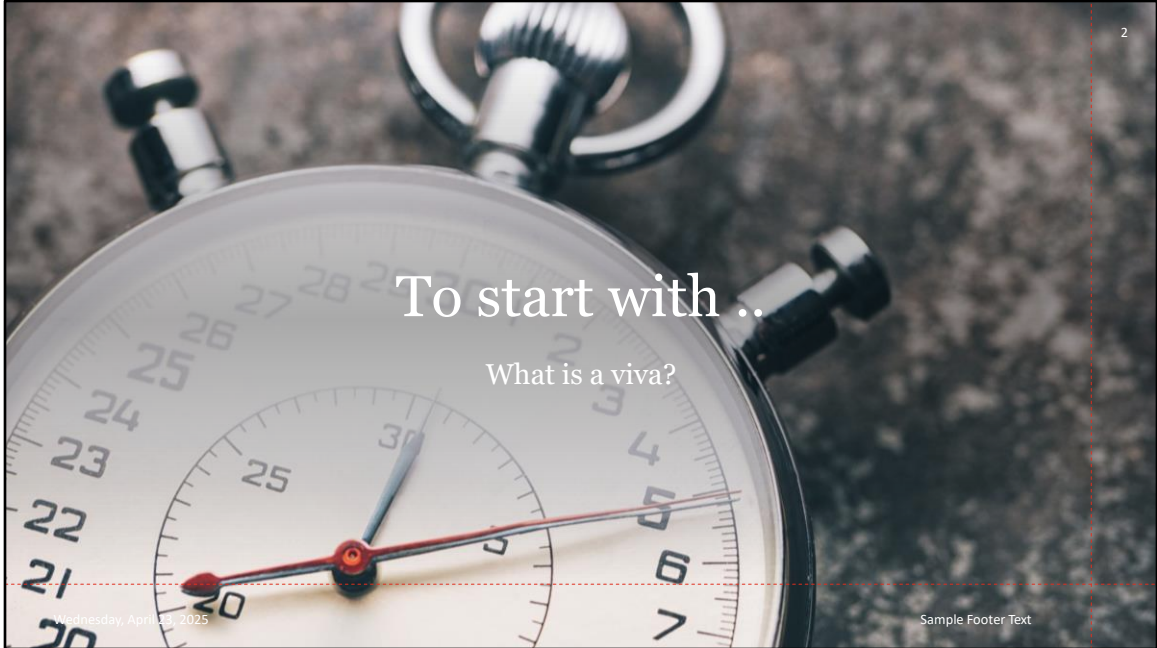
A recent review in Advance HE who compiled a compendium of assessment techniques in higher education said only a handful of universities like UCL, Manchester and Leeds were conducting Viva Voces in taught programmes.

As an UG student myself from Manchester I had experienced first hand viva voces (when I was between grade boundary and had mit circs) they hauled me into the university during my summer holidays for a 'viva'. I had little preparation and was just told they I would be 'asked anything'. I was pretty worried since I felt under-prepared, but during the viva _ I recall I wasn't asked anything I couldn't answer - partly as it was all to do with my final project and the stuff I had learned during 4 years at UG level. They were checking my knowledge – and because it was all my 'own work')before the days of the internet so there was little prospect of copying anything), it was fairly easy to navigate. Please to say my viva was a success as I graduated with a first class honours.

Since then I had no or little experience of vivas until my transfer viva and then my

final Phd viva at Manchester University – which was certainly not straight forward. I diligently prepared using a little book called ‘how to pass a viva’. Again in 2003 there really wasn’t much in the way of internet resources, there was no social media and no youtube. But that was an interesting story because there was no script to follow, and nothing could prepare me for the fire alarm going off in the middle of my Phd viva and me having to sit outside in the Manchester rain and then externals went to the pub across the road to ‘discuss my phd’. After a while they returned (after a few beers I later learnt) and as you know I have a PhD). There goes without saying that a viva can be unpredictable as its not scripted.

Fast forward 20 years later – I’m here at BU – where we don’t (to my knowledge use Vivas only at PHD level). So as PL for MA Marketing Communications and with my esteemed colleague Stuart Armon, I was pleased to be involved with the unit “Research in action” which is a core unit on my programme - where a viva voce was accepted as a form of assessment. I have to acknowledge Stuart here as this is his unit and introduced the idea of a viva as a part-exchange of assessment within the unit.



Show of hands who has experienced being the student?
Who has experienced being the examiner?

In an oral examination, a student provides a spoken response to questions posed by one or more examiners in an isolated setting. It gives the student opportunities to explain, expand, defend or justify a piece of work.

The examination usually lasts anything between 15 and 30 minutes, - but can last a couple of hours for a Phd. Varies in structure between closed, in which all questions are prepared beforehand, and open, in which

the examiner builds upon points raised by the student during the examination.









It's not scripted.

It can be recorded.

What's interesting about this method can be either unit specific or synoptic, which makes it highly adaptative form of assessment across different degrees and subjects in different ways. You can orally assess a specific piece of knowledge within a unit or more broadly someone's knowledge across their discipline

You can assess with a viva for a part of an assessment of a unit and combine it with a written piece of work or you can combine it with other methods such as written exam. It's rarely used as a stand alone mode of assessment.

What can a viva assess?

-  Communication skills
-  Subject Knowledge and Understanding
-  Critical Thinking and Analysis
-  Research Skills
-  Problem Solving Skills
-  Professional & Ethical Understanding
-  Preparedness and Adaptability
-  Personal Reflection and Growth

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What does it assess? The list is endless. Here are a few.

- communication skills (pretty vital in the line of work where my students graduate in marketing communications!) Clarity and coherence in expressing ideas. Effectiveness in oral communication.
- subject knowledge and understanding – depth and breadth
- critical thinking & analysis –
- Research skills
- problem solving

Preparedness and Adaptability:


- Readiness to respond to unexpected questions or challenges.
- Flexibility in adapting to different contexts and requirements.
- Capability to defend and justify decisions and viewpoints.


Personal Reflection and Growth:


- Insight into personal learning and development.
- Ability to reflect on feedback and experiences.
- Commitment to continuous improvement and lifelong learning.


I'll run through what we did and you can decide for yourself whether you think it's a formal form of assessment you'd like to use or explore using in any of your teaching.

Viva Voce


WHAT WE DID


PRACTICALITIES


PITFALLS


POSITIVES

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What we did

Level 7 "Research in Action" unit in marketing communications, students were assessed using this approach.

Practicalities on how we did it, how it was organised etc

Pitfalls – this method did pose some interesting challenges and unearthed some interesting student

feedback,

But of course there were a few positives too. – as said –
I'll let you make your mind up whether you think its
worth it.

Research in Action

L7

20 credit unit

1. Demonstrate an advanced understanding of theoretical, practical and ethical issues concerned with the development of a research design;

2. Design, conduct, interpret and present research based on critical reflection;

3. Demonstrate an advanced, critical and reflective appreciation of the value of academic research, its implications for and application to professional practice.

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What did we do:

Research in action a 20 credit unit a mandatory on not only MA Marketing Communications but also MA Advertising _ and I guess most programmes have a built in 'research' unit to teach students about research.

This can often be perceived as quite a dry and boring compared to subject topics, mainly because its abstract, its technically complex and therefore quite daunting for new researchers (especially ug with no experience of research), perceived as irrelevant by students because it most likely doesn't match their career goals, lack of context, it can feel repetitive, and most of all, the assessment types linked with this kind of unit often involve, writing research proposals, conducting a detailed analysis ... and so you get the picture.

Stuart has to be credited here with the idea of spicing up the assessment and introducing the concept of viva to assess the 3 ILO's which were:

Two parts to the assessment

Submit a decision tree outlining a research project that would contribute to existing knowledge (equivalent 1,000 words)

20 minute viva voce to defend their research decision tree (equivalent to 2000 words)

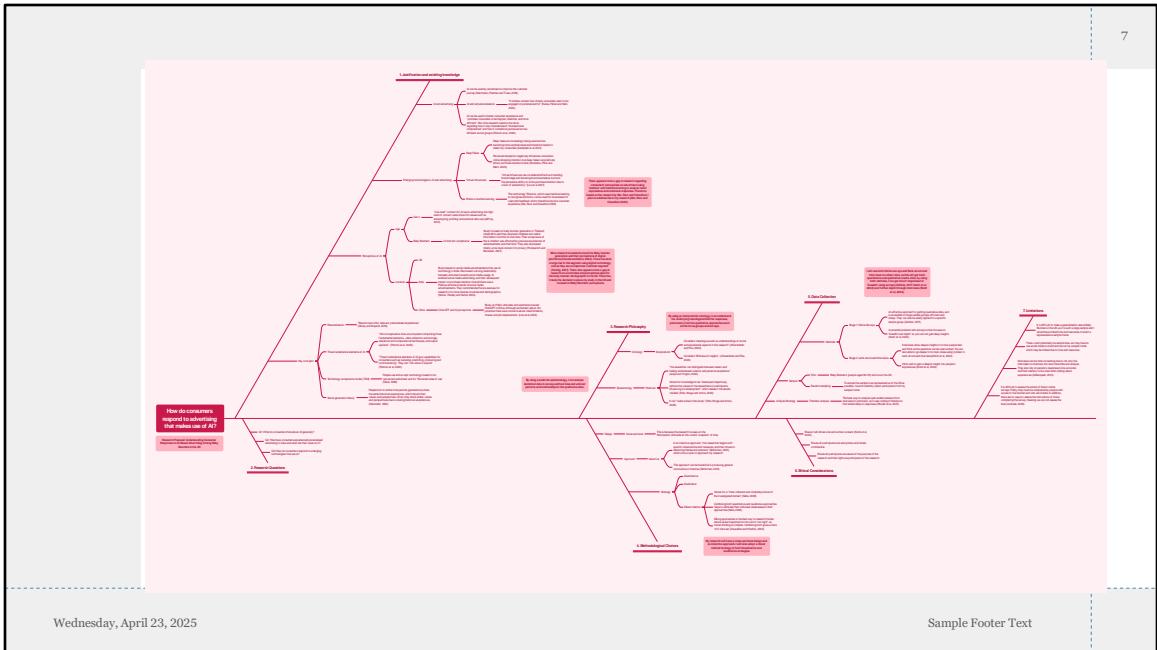
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Students were required to submit a decision tree outlining a research project that would contribute to existing knowledge on a specific issue. This was equivalent to 1000 words. This fits nicely into Ilos' where they have to design a piece of research

Following this, they attended a 20-minute viva to defend their research proposal before the teaching team. This was equivalent to 2000 words. This meets the other Ilo;s where they have to demonstrate an understanding of their research thought and explain their decision making.

Combined using a written piece pf work "i.e. the ingredients and the viva is the recipe helps to deliver against these ILO's.



Example of decision tree- you can see here its complex map of a journey from research idea to limitations embedding into this and weaved into this the key moments youd expect to be present with any empirical piece of research.

How do consumers respond to advertising that makes use of AI?

The decision tree had to show and justify the choices you have made at each stage of the research process, including but not restricted to:



Setting of appropriate research questions based on a review of relevant literature



Determining an appropriate philosophical paradigm



Deciding on a credible research approach and design



Identifying the best methods for data collection and analysis

Practicalities

- Students submitted decision tree
- Students were allocated a 20-minute slot within 2 weeks of decision tree submission (face to face)
- Attended by UL and second marker to calibrate
- Recorded for EE
- Questions were fluid, raised upon by students' answers

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Students are required to submit a research proposal in the form of a decision tree (equivalent to 1000 words in length) that maps out a research project that they believe would add to the existing body of knowledge regarding a particular issue. The broad nature of the research project and the format of the decision tree will be briefed in the first week of teaching (w/c 29th January).

The decision tree must show and justify the choices you have made at each stage of the research process, including but not restricted to:



Setting of appropriate research questions based on a review of relevant literature



Determining an appropriate philosophical paradigm



Deciding on a credible research approach and design



Identifying the best methods for data collection and analysis



Considering the ethical implications of the research and potential limitations

These stages will form the basis of the unit's teaching schedule with the opportunity to progress

through the project each week via formative assessment tasks undertaken in class and/or online.

Following the submission of the decision tree, students will be invited to attend a 20 minute meeting

(equivalent to 2000 words) where they will be required to defend their proposal to the teaching team

(known as a viva voce)

Typical questions



Warm up – what led you to this research idea?



Deep dive – where do you think this research might take you? Who would value from this research?



Why did you choose this specific research design and methodology?



Can you see any challenges with researcher bias? How would / could these be overcome?



How could you ensure the ethical integrity of your research is met?

Pitfalls

- Oral examinations take a long time to conduct so are unsuitable for large class groups
- If the exam is to be performed by more than one examiner, clear marking guidelines must be established for fairness to students
- Unlike a written examination there is no anonymity for students, which could cause bias
- If unfamiliar with the format, oral examinations can be very stressful for students – often more so than a written exam
- If students struggle with English as their first language..... !
- Limited scope – not covering entire breadth of their work in 20 minutes

Negative aspects from a student's perspective:

If unfamiliar with the format, oral examinations can be very stressful for students – often more so than a written exam. This could have a detrimental effect on their performance in the exam, even if they have high level of subject knowledge and understanding.

Students could be negatively impacted by bias from a familiar examiner, or their random selection of questions, which an individual may deem to be more difficult than equivalent questions.

Positives

Showcase their advanced understanding of research design, critical thinking, and reflective skills through face-to-face oral assessments

Develop communication skills

Be challenged on the spot thinking

Mitigate use of reliance on AI

Able to have face to face conversations with students we might not have seen

Identify any students who struggle with English as their first language

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Exert taken from Advance HE additionally:

Benefits from a teaching perspective:

The examination can be designed to assess a variety of skills, from simple knowledge recall to more advanced problem solving questions, so grading can be tailored to the level of each student. A student's knowledge and ability can be accurately assessed in an oral examination as it is difficult for answers to be shared between students, especially if the examiner uses a random selection of prepared questions for each student.

Feedback can be given to students immediately after the examination, which allows for their personal improvement, and the examiner can quickly identify any gaps in the knowledge of the students as a group.

Positive aspects from a student's perspective:

Oral examinations provide an excellent opportunity to practice oral communication skills, as well as the ability to adapt to a situation, which are valuable skills to have in any working environment. In addition, some students may find it easier to explain their thoughts and knowledge orally (compared to a written exam) as there can be more interaction with the examiner. Information rehearsed through speech is more likely to be retained than that memorised for a written examination.

The final word

Students' opinions on this choice of assessment technique:

“While an oral examination would at first be much more stressful than a written examination, I think some of this stress could be alleviated by having adequate time to practise oral communication skills beforehand and being told what to expect from the exam. It could be difficult to review your answers as you would in a written exam, but I think being able to form a suitable response to a question on the spot is a valuable skill to have.”