

Assessing by viva voce

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Background and rationale

The idea of introducing viva voce assessments emerged during a review of the assessment profile of the Drama Department. Despite the practical orientation of the programme, assessments were dominated by 60% Practical Project, 40% Essay weightings. Good practical marks were frequently undermined by weaker grades for written work, despite students' evident development of understanding through practice, and written evaluations were generally of poor quality.

In addition, staff had reported an unhealthy split in the focus of practical modules where written course-work was a requirement. In the drama professions it is more necessary to be able to explain ideas and creative concepts orally and pursue them somatically: the process of making work is physically and vocally-based; critical reflection comes orally too in the form of direction, post-show discussions and de-briefings. Teaching strategies for practical work embrace this, applying theoretical concepts in concrete praxis. Students' development on such courses requires them to invest in sensory and experiential learning and a progressively intensive approach to practice. Presenting work to tutors and peers for critical feedback is the major teaching and learning mode. Having to change tack and focus on conceptualising theory, rather than exploring through creativity, and essay writing rather than practical skills, constrained tutors and students.

The introduction of an oral examination – a viva voce – to assess students' ability to critically reflect on and evaluate their practice could provide a viable alternative. Viva voces would both acknowledge and play to the strengths of students' oral communication skills and offer them the chance to develop more formal interview techniques, as well as acknowledging the vocal and oral nature of the discipline.

The aim of the project was to introduce viva voce exams as a method of assessing critical reflection on practical work in order primarily to improve the range of assessments, but in addition to give students an opportunity to sustain their achievement on practical modules. The focus was on finding and implementing strategies that would promote good practice in assessment.

Research and consultancy

Research and consultancy was conducted with staff in other Performing Arts institutions. This revealed several different modes of operating viva voces, both group and individual. Group vivas were usually between 30-40 minutes for 5-8 students. Individual vivas varied in length from 5 to 45 minutes, depending on Level and credit rating. Weightings varied too, but the majority conducted as critical reflections on practical work were awarded between 10% and 30% of the module grade. Most tutors advise students to keep a logbook or performance diary to which they may refer in the viva.

In a viva the tutor listens to the student and can gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the learning and teaching process. We were advised that putting students at ease and creating a relaxed atmosphere produced better results. Questions should be limited and the onus was on the student to speak.

The benefits for students of viva voces as post-production analyses were stated as follows:

- Encouraging openness through dialogue
- A chance for student to articulate what they've learnt
- An opportunity to interpret their work pragmatically and personally

For staff the following benefits were mentioned:

- To give feedback in a non-threatening environment
- Gaining student feedback at first-hand
- Distinguishing between students in group projects

Current students were also consulted.

The implementation of the innovation

Vivas were introduced on two second year modules: Physical Theatre and TV & Radio Drama. On both modules students learn through practice, extending their understanding of physical theatre and TV/Radio drama via the creation of short group pieces. Both modules demanded intensive investment in collaborative practical work. Students worked independently in groups to produce pieces for assessment. Teaching was practically-based, offering workshops to extend appropriate skills and techniques.

Minor modifications removed the essay, and practical assessment weighting was increased from 60% to 80%, with a reflective viva at 20%. This decision took into account the fact that removing the essay would allow for more intensive practical teaching, and therefore place a greater demand on students in practical assessment. The weighting also matched practice in other institutions.

Students intending to take these modules were consulted in the previous semester about these changes. All stated a preference for a viva rather than an essay.

Those taking Physical Theatre had individual vivas. Students on this module had already received written feedback on their practical assessments which could be referred to in the vivas. On TV/Radio Drama, due to the differing nature of the projects, TV students had group vivas and Radio students had individual vivas. These students had not had written feedback on their practical assessments which had been screened/broadcast the previous evening. However, they had all submitted a short summary of their contributions to the group projects and their reflection on their progress which tutors could refer to in the vivas. Questions and criteria were published a week prior to the viva date. (see Appendix 1)

Third year students undertaking practical Double Projects were also included as a result of student consultation. They were offered the choice between a written Critical Evaluation (1500 words) or a viva voce (10 minutes) for the 10% element. 80% chose the viva option.

Staff moderated vivas in the usual way (i.e. a sample double-marked).

The outcomes

Vivas proved successful as a vehicle for assessing critical evaluation and reflexive practice. They were less successful as a vehicle for ascertaining a knowledge base.

Through the use of an oral assessment, drama students were able to maintain the standard of their practical work.

Sample statistics from Dr2003 Physical Theatre

The mean mark for the practical elements:

2000-1 B11
2001-2 B11

The mean mark for the essay component:

2000-1 C9

This amounted to 60% and the mean mark for the essay was C9

Mean marks for the viva component

2001-2 B11

Their weighting at 20% had also had less damaging effect on high practical grades.

We are still awaiting the returns of student questionnaires (due to the late scheduling of assessments). Verbal feedback suggests the majority prefer vivas to written evaluations. Students relish the opportunity to discuss their work one-to-one, even though vivas generate nerves.

Evaluation

Students received the general principle of the viva voce very positively. Staff felt it gave them a good opportunity to give face-to-face attention to individual students, and was a constructive development of the lecturer/student relationship. It followed on well from the 'auto-cours' method of teaching on Physical Theatre, where work in progress was monitored weekly and given lecturer and peer feedback. Staff found vivas provided a way of distinguishing between those who had digested and understood the process and those who had simply remembered the process and learned some relevant quotes.

Vivas for TV/Radio Drama were also well received, with 96% stating this was an appropriate assessment task. On the TV strand, group vivas proved particularly successful. Jeremy Brown, the Visiting Lecturer who taught the TV strand, put the idea of a group viva forward. The same questions were asked of each student in varying rotation. As they had to listen to each other's response, individuals were forced to search for different responses – in other words work harder. The group viva has a number of positive features:

- It reflects the collaborative nature of the work
- It offers a sense of closure for the whole group
- Students are less likely to lie or exaggerate their contribution in front of peer members of the group
- It makes more efficient use of staff time (i.e. 6-8 students in 30-40 minutes).

Staff conducting individual vivas realised that scheduling too many vivas in a session was counter-productive, as they then had to listen to them again on audio tape in order to mark them. Ideally, marking should occur immediately after the viva. We have not yet designed marking sheets for vivas, but this is something we will be addressing.

Proposed future developments

We feel the introduction of vivas has generally been positive and has made a qualitative difference to students' attitude to critical evaluation of their work. Staff believe they have made a significant impact on the dialogue regarding assessment and student progress. We will continue to use viva voce assessments on modules which are dedicated to developing students' practical skills. However, we have identified a number of points for consideration and action:

- Where appropriate implement group vivas
- Draw up a code of practice for vivas

- Develop staff training in how to structure, respond to and assess vivas
- Spread assessment times over a longer period (max. 5 per session)

We aim to follow up our findings by addressing issues raised and aim to develop good practice.

Appendix 1

DR2205 TV and Radio Drama

Viva Voce Assessment: brief and details

Vivas will take place after the screenings/transmission.

Times for groups/individuals will be posted one week prior to the assessments.

Due to the different nature of teaching and practice in these two media, tutors propose that TV Drama students will have group vivas (30-40mins) and Radio Drama students will have individual vivas (10-12 mins).

Radio Drama students have already submitted a mid-module self evaluation which will be referred to during the viva.

TV Drama students must submit a Contributions List for each group, together with individual self-evaluations (one page of critical reflections on the process).

Vivas will be conducted with reference to the following questions:

- How has your understanding of TV/Radio Drama expanded during this module and through the practical work? (nb You will be expected to refer to current examples of TV or Radio Drama).
- To what extent, and how do you feel you have developed your individual skills within the practical tasks set?
- **TV only:** What do you think are the challenges for inter-disciplinary work in the context of this module?
- **Radio only:** What have you found to be the most challenging aspect of working in Radio as compared to stage?
- What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of your contribution to the process?

ALL VIVAS WILL BE RECORDED. SOME WILL BE DOUBLE-MARKED FOR MODERATION PURPOSES.

Criteria for these Viva assessments are as follows:

- Understanding of the language of TV/Radio production
- Ability to offer self-critical evaluation in relation to a defined creative role
- Appreciation of individual contributions to a group exercise within given parameters
- Ability to articulate key performance/directing/production skills and techniques required for the medium.

Physical Theatre

Viva Voce

The viva voce is worth 20% of your overall module grade.

You will be in discussion with your tutor for 10 minutes.

Areas of discussion will include:

1. The shared principles of all Physical Theatre forms you have been introduced to.

2. The key stages of development in your process – related to key practitioners encountered.
3. Response to written feedback.
4. What you feel you have learned from the module.

Assessment criteria:

Evidence of knowledge of broader field of physical theatre.	25%
Evidence of understanding of process studied	25%
Ability to articulate ideas using appropriate terminology	25%
Ability to appraise your work critically	25%

Please see notice board for the time and date of your viva voce.

DR2003 PHYSICAL THEATRE**Viva Voce: Questions**

1. What are the shared principles of the three styles of work you have been introduced to. Clown Commedia/ dance based physical theatre?
2. What were the key stages in the development of your piece and how did this relate to your study of the process proposed by Lecoq?
3. Having had your written feedback, how would you develop the piece further?
4. Can you sum up what you feel you have learned on the module?