

Oral Examinations as an Evaluation and Learning Technique For Agribusiness Students

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Summary: An oral examination was given to final year undergraduate Agribusiness students.

While the purpose of the assessment was to test student knowledge of course material, a very important secondary goal was to improve student oral communication skills.

Introduction: In recognition of the importance of communication, some Universities require all students to take at least one course in communications. The course may be only written communication, or only oral communication, or a combination. Some Universities may also require that final year students, perhaps working as a member of a team, to present research findings, orally and written, on an assigned topic.

In today's Agribusiness customer driven environment, there is greater emphasis on oral communication skills than on written skills. Oral communication is required to respond to customer questions, to defend a company position or to negotiate a significant business issue. These situations require mastery of subject material, but also require the ability to orally communicate a business message to achieve specific goals.

The experience of the authors is that oral communication skills important to Agribusiness students extend beyond formal classroom presentations to situations which are less structured. The first 'real life' situation faced by graduating students in which oral communication skills are

important often is when they interview prospective employers for a job. However, in everyday business situations, it is vital to be able to clearly and logically discuss problems in order to successfully achieve certain goals. The authors attempted to devise a mechanism to enhance the oral communication skills of Agribusiness students.

Problem: The problem was to improve the oral communication skills of students. The authors used an oral examination in an attempt to solve this problem. The goals of the oral examination were to:

1. Assess student comprehension of course material;
2. Enhance student understanding of the importance of describing a business situation in a logical sequence;
3. Provide the students with some experience in how to use oral communications to improve their ability to accomplish certain goals;
4. Provide an opportunity for students to learn how to quickly, and in a structured manner, react to unexpected questions.

The authors believe an oral examination provides an opportunity for students to understand how to correlate questions with a logical answer, how to structure a response, how to behave during questioning and discussions and how to explain their position clearly, logically and persuasively.

Methodology: Using experience from their own undergraduate education, the authors conducted oral final examinations for 19 students in a final year Agribusiness paper. The procedure followed was:

1. Approximately two weeks prior to the assessment, the students were given 70 questions on important topics covered in lectures, readings and assignments.
2. Three questions from the list of 70 questions were randomly selected by the examiners and written on a 'ticket'. A fourth question, based on problems worked by students during the semester, was also included on the ticket.
3. Students were given a choice of taking only the oral examination, a written examination or both, applying the highest score toward their final grade.
4. Before the oral examination, students randomly selected a ticket and were given one hour to prepare responses to the questions and to solve the problem. No reference material was permitted.
5. When the student was ready, the oral examination began. The examination was conducted with only the student and two examiners in attendance. Each student was given approximately 15 minutes to answer their questions and to solve their problem. The students were informed they could answer the questions in any sequence they chose, they could use the white board if appropriate and would be graded on the correctness of their answers, their ability to communicate the answers and on their general mastery of the topic. A correct answer included not only the factual response to the question, but a structured response in which the student provided basic definitions, defined the question, gave a decision / conclusion and supported the result.

6. The students were expected to define words, explain the problem, discuss their solution and defend their answer. The examiners could ask additional questions during the student's explanation to assess the depth of knowledge of the student in the subject.

7. After the students finished their answers to all questions, the examiners immediately discussed with the student the strong points of the answers, the weak points and suggestions for improvements. The students were then given a grade for their performance. The final assessment was based on how the students answered all of the questions, but the problem solved was marked twice as high as the more general questions.

Results:

1. Although an optional method of assessment, 90% of the enrolled students took the oral examination.

2. Of those who took the oral examination, only 2 (10%), chose to take the written examination in addition to their oral examination.

3. The students said the oral examination was more complicated, and they were more nervous, than they expected. Despite the fact they knew the questions before hand, were examined by only two people with whom they had close contact all semester, were examined in a positive and supportive environment, the students were surprised about their level of nervousness.

4. The immediate feedback from the examiners about the quality of their answers - the strong points and the weak points - was well received by the students and appeared to enhance their knowledge of, and confidence in, the material.
5. The students indicated that immediate feedback about their ability to communicate also was beneficial as they recognised how they might have improved their ability to communicate as well as understanding areas in which they communicated well.
6. Most students agreed with their marks. As noted above, only 10% of those examined chose to take the written examination in expectation of a higher mark.
7. For the examiners, the oral examination permits a more comprehensive assessment of student ability than a written examination in that the examiners may immediately ask additional questions, or request clarification about answers.

Conclusions and Recommendations: The success of the students in the examination depended on their ability to orally communicate not only answers, but to discuss their point of view.

With 19 students interviewed, total required time was approximately 6 hours. For larger classes, additional examiners might be appropriate.

Students should receive instruction ahead of time about the best approach to use when providing an answer, how to deal with stress and what to do when problems arise.

The oral examination should not be optional. While the importance of the performance on the final grade should be left to the instructor's discretion, all students should sit an oral examination during the course.

Oral examinations in additional agribusiness courses will be undertaken. However, for the students to fully benefit from oral examinations, it is recommended that the students receive several lectures, or even take a course, in business psychology and business communications.

Experience will permit the evaluator to tell the student that the question has been answered so that there is no doubt the student knows the material well. An experienced evaluator will know when to say "Stop it - that's enough. You know the answer!!"