# Enhancing Learning with Oral Assessment as a Culminating Activity for Faculty Development

Diane J. Salter & Shannon E. Rushe
St. Georges University

*This paper describes the oral assessment activity we designed and used as a culminating activity for faculty participants in a professional academic development program. The program offers multiple certificates, and the goal of each certificate is to enhance participants' abilities to design and deliver exceptional student learning experiences. We describe the unique nature of the assessment activity and provide details on the process of implementing oral assessment. This process enabled faculty to demonstrate achievement of the program learning outcomes and consider next steps in their professional development. Three key ideas discussed in this paper are: oral assessment, folio thinking, and dialogic curriculum.*

*Dans cet article, nous présentons l'activité d'évaluation orale que nous avons conçue comme le point culminant d'un programme de perfectionnement professionnel universitaire pour les enseignants. Ce programme comprend plusieurs certificats visant chacun à renforcer la capacité des participants à créer des expériences d'apprentissage exceptionnelles pour les étudiants. Nous montrons en quoi l'évaluation orale est unique et nous fournissons des précisions au sujet du processus de mise en œuvre de cette activité. Grâce à l'évaluation, les enseignants ont été à même de montrer qu'ils avaient atteint les objectifs d'apprentissage du programme et d'envisager la suite de leur perfectionnement professionnel. Voici en somme les trois idées clés dont traite cet article : l'évaluation orale, la pensée organisée sous forme de dossier (folio thinking) et le programme d'étude dialogique.*

## Oral Assessment

Oral assessment has a long history in higher education and comes in many forms such as in-class presentations, debates, and informal in-class questions with student responses. Oral examinations are commonly used for assessment of medical students in clinical situations (Carney et al, 1986) as well as in masters and doctoral theses dissertations. Oral assessment can be beneficial as it aligns well with specific learning outcomes, allows for probing of students' knowledge, allows students to reflect on their work and practice, improves learning, is better suited to some students' learning styles, allows clarification of the meaning of the question, and helps ensure academic integrity (Joughin, 1998, 2010). In comparing student attitudes towards oral and written assessments, many students perceive oral assessments as more useful and authentic than written assignments (Huxham et al, 2012). This research also found that the oral assessments used were a powerful tool to help students establish a personal identity (Huxham et al, 2012).

An oral assessment activity provides opportunities for formative and summative feedback, both informal and formal, and can be incorporated into in-class activities (from both peers and instructors) and high-stakes, summative assessments. Oral assessment combined with reflection as a student activity has been described as beneficial (Hosein & Roe, 2017; Aronson, (2014); Poldner et al., 2014). However, we were unable to find any reference

to the use of oral assessment in faculty development programs. We believe this dialogic, oral assessment is an appropriate way to assess faculty as they build on existing knowledge and try out new ways of thinking about their approaches to teaching.

# Folio Thinking

Compilation of a portfolio of work (such as collected assignments, artwork, other documents), combined with reflection on personal learning, allows students to demonstrate their ability to 'connect the dots' between elements of a course or program. In our use of this approach, folio thinking was incorporated both inside and outside the classroom using structured activities that required faculty to reflect on their experiences and self-assess their achievement of the intended course learning outcomes. The participants' self-assessments were ongoing, and we found that one benefit of this approach was that students developed skills for self-assessment and became self-directed learners. To provide opportunities for peer assessment and continuous feedback to learning in progress, we paired faculty and created teams during the workshops so that participants could benefit from dialogue with colleagues and receive informal peer feedback on their strategies and tasks in progress (such as when they revise their course learning outcomes, when they design rubrics, etc.).

In addition, activities such as reflection and oral assessment provided evidence to demonstrate that the faculty had achieved the learning outcomes of the program with evidence for both themselves and the instructor. Participants demonstrated their ability to use folio thinking by reflecting on each component of their learning journey through the certificate and incorporating their application of the multiple strategies learned into their reflection paper.

# Dialogic Curriculum

Oral activities are a component of dialogic curriculum; this design approach is created to engage students in discussing and generating new knowledge rather than passively listening. Dialogic curriculum is essential to promote deep learning (Biggs, 2005). Students learn by talking about ideas, not by just listening or memorizing (Applebee, 1996; Laurillard, 2002; Salter et al, 2004; Salter, 2013; Vella, 2001). As described by Applebee: "Knowledge arises out of participation in ongoing conversations about things that matter, conversations that are themselves embedded within larger traditions of discourse that we have come to value (in science, the arts, history, literature, and mathematics, among many others)." (Applebee, 1996. p3).

Dialogic curriculum requires the instructor to consider, as part of the course design, when these meaningful opportunities for students can be incorporated into course work. Dialogic curriculum incorporates assessment of student learning that is conducted through a conversation that allows for dialogue and probing. This type of assessment involves dialogue rather than a monologue and can be used in coaching sessions, small group learning, and culminating activities. Dialogue provides an opportunity to expand and self-correct, allows students who may be more able to express ideas in words rather than in writing to demonstrate their competence, and provides an opportunity for the instructor to probe in order to gain a better understanding of a student's capabilities. A pedagogy that supports students' entry into meaningful traditions of conversation must be dialogic in nature (Applebee, 1996).

# Program Overview

The Basics and Beyond program, introduced at the university in September of 2017, offered three new certificates for professional learning in higher education. Each certificate required completion of 30+ hours of professional learning comprised of eight one-hour sessions (four core and four electives), associated pre- and post-session tasks, a reflective paper, and a consultation.

The three certificates offered as part of the Basics and Beyond Program are:

1. Scholarly Foundations in Teaching and Learning
2. Research in Teaching and Learning
3. Leadership in Teaching and Learning

### Table 1

| Scholarly Foundations in Teaching and Learning | Research in Teaching and Learning | Leadership in Teaching and Learning |
|---|---|---|
| Core Sessions: | Core Sessions: | Core Sessions: |
| Planning Your Class for Active Learning | Being a Mindful Practitioner: The Heart of Scholarly Teaching | Leading Curriculum Initiatives |
| Aligning Learning Outcomes/ Learning Activities/ Assessments | Research Methods for Teaching and Learning | Leading Through Coaching and Mentoring |
| Approaches to Teaching that Enhance Students' Approaches to Learning | Research Ethics for Classroom Research | Distributed Leadership in Teaching and Learning |
| Assessment for Learning | Publishing Your Research on Teaching and Learning | Communities of Practice |

Over four teaching semesters, 163 participants were registered in the program, with a total attendance of 1790 throughout 112 workshops. Eighty-two certificates were awarded: 46 Scholarly Teaching certificates, 19 Research certificates, and 17

Leadership certificates. The four core sessions required for each certificate are shown below.

In addition to the core sessions, faculty chose four elective sessions for each certificate. New elective topics were added each semester to provide continued opportunities for professional learning. A two-year research project assessed multiple aspects of the program (Salter et al., 2019).

Each session has clearly articulated learning outcomes. These learning outcomes are assessed in the culminating oral activity described in this article. As an example, the learning outcomes of each of the four core sessions in the Scholarly Foundations in Teaching and Learning certificate are described below.

## Planning Your Class for Active Learning

Upon completion of the session and post-session tasks, participants will be able to:

1. Describe the essential elements of a lesson plan;
2. Customize a lesson planning template for their teaching needs;
3. Apply time management strategies to their lesson plan; and
4. Use and modify a lesson plan for future classes.

## Aligning Learning Outcomes with Learning Activities and Assessment

Upon completion of the session and post-session tasks, participants will be able to:

1. Describe an "outcomes-based" approach to teaching and learning;
2. Recognize the importance of curriculum alignment;
3. Review your course learning outcomes to ensure they are "measurable" and can be assessed;
4. Plan for alignment of learning activities and assessment; and
5. Review a course syllabus and check for alignment.

## Approaches to Teaching That Enhance Students' Approaches to Learning

Upon completion of the session and post-session tasks, participants will be able to:

1. Describe the difference between deep vs surface learning;
2. Apply evidence-based strategies to promote deep vs surface learning; and
3. Apply relevant concepts to their teaching.

## Assessment for Learning

Upon completion of the session and post-session tasks, participants will be able to:

1. Discuss the purposes of assessment;
2. Consider the role of standards of assessment;
3. Discuss assessment terminology relevant to an outcomes-based approach to student learning;
4. Discuss the purposes of assessment; and
5. Recognize multiple forms of assessment.

## Oral Assessment as a Culminating Activity

The oral assessment was conducted during an individual consultation with the program director. For completion of each certificate, participants must have:

1. Attended all sessions;
2. Completed and submitted all post-session tasks;
3. Submitted a written reflection paper; and
4. Have a consultation meeting with the program director.

Submission of all post-session tasks and the reflection paper are required prior to scheduling the consultation. The reflective essay and consultation are important aspects of the program that incorporate oral assessment, folio thinking, and dialogic curriculum.

The reflective paper required faculty to demonstrate they had successfully met the learning outcomes of the program by compiling and reflecting upon the multiple activities completed over their period of study. This paper was required as part of the program curriculum. Faculty were invited to participate in a two-year research project approved by the university's ethics review board. Signed consent forms gave permission for the researchers to use feedback on the program, comments made in the reflection papers, and comments during the oral assessment to be used in educational publications and presentations.

# Consultation and Oral Assessment

In our example of dialogic, oral assessment, the faculty members were required to submit a reflective essay prior to their consultation meeting. The program director then read the essay and reviewed the participant's completed post-session tasks. The post-session tasks and the reflective essay were assessed for completeness and application of strategies. The tasks were viewed as works in progress. Questions were raised by both parties and concepts were clarified as part of the consultation process. In this way, the consultation provided an opportunity for professional learning through reflection, discussion and feedback.

During the consultation, the course director invited the faculty member to read their reflective essay aloud. Faculty members were (pleasantly) surprised by the oral activity as there are not often opportunities to read reflections aloud and receive feedback. This activity created a different dynamic within the meeting. Reading the reflection aloud enabled a conversation to take place that would not be possible if the director had merely read the essay prior to the meeting and made comments on the text. During an oral reading of their reflection, faculty often stopped at various points to spontaneously expand upon ideas they had noted in their paper. In addition, the director was able to probe ideas if clarification was needed. Through this process, the reading was a dialogue about the new directions in approaches to teaching that the faculty member

reflected upon. The reading of the reflective essay enabled both the faculty member and the director to deepen their knowledge and to demonstrate to both parties how well the learning outcomes of the program had been met. The folder of completed tasks was reviewed during the consultation by both parties after the reading and discussion of the reflective essay. The director was able to provide feedback and to engage in a discussion of the next steps the faculty member had planned for their professional learning journey. As part of the formal research conducted on the project, specific feedback from the participants about the consultation indicated they found this culminating activity an energizing and exciting way to finish the certificate. The following guidelines for the reflective essay were created by the program curriculum team and distributed to participants.

# Guidelines for Your Reflective Essay

The reflective essay is an opportunity to consolidate your thinking about your experiences during the program. The reflective essay is about you. It is not a repetition of the content you have learned during the sessions. It will not be like anyone else's reflective essay. Rather, the reflective essay is a chance for you to think about what you have learned, how you have connected ideas across your experience during the sessions, and reflect on how you might apply the concepts in your own teaching situation. Each essay is an individual and personal reflection. The list below is intended to be a catalyst to help you think about how you will approach your reflective essay. You may want to write about some of the following aspects:

- What surprised you about the sessions or throughout the program
- What did you learn during the sessions?
- How did the post-session tasks contribute to your learning?
- What connections have you made between the sessions?

- Has what you learned influenced your professional goals related to teaching and learning? If yes, how?
- What are your plans to continue your journey as a teacher?
- Are there new strategies that were discussed that you have, or hope to incorporate in your teaching?

# Consultation Process (45 minutes)

The process for conducting the consultation is as follows:

1. Instructor and student each have a printed copy of the essay during the consultation.
2. Instructor invites student to read their reflective essay aloud.
3. The reading is conducted as a conversation with both student and instructor stopping to reflect on comments, ask for clarification, and receive feedback.
4. Student demonstrates achievement of learning outcomes during the dialogue.
5. The dialogue encourages reflection to strengthen understanding of the course concepts.
6. The conversation incorporates discussion of next steps in the student's learning journey.

# Analysis of Reflective Papers and Oral Assessment Activity

Overall, 82 certificates were awarded as follows: 46 Scholarly Teaching Certificates, 19 Research in Teaching and Learning Certificates and 17 Leadership Certificates. The oral assessment is just one component of the program. This article includes the analysis of the 46 essays collected upon completion of the Scholarly Teaching Certificate. The researchers were interested in the themes emerging upon completion of a faculty development program. The reflective papers were analyzed using qualitative methods. A phenomenological approach was used to analyze the reflective papers to explore the nature of the experience of participants in the program. In the

initial analysis, comments were coded by three independent researchers to identify themes. Differences in coding were resolved by discussion until 100% agreement was obtained in the coding of the comments. Identified themes were consistent with attitudinal and behavioral change. The inductive qualitative analysis of the reflective essays showed seven themes: Growth Mindset, Professional Identity Formation, Transformation in Approaches to Teaching, Thinking about the Learner, Intention to Apply Strategies, Application of Strategies and Benefit of the Professional Learning. Representative examples of comments by theme are included in Table 2.

## Summary

The oral assessment was conducted following a 30+ hour certificate program in faculty development. Faculty in the program received formative feedback and summative assessment using oral and written assessments. We created a dialogic curriculum for the program to engage faculty in discussion and dialogue that required folio thinking across and beyond each component of the program. Formative feedback was provided during and after each workshop through in-session activities and the completion of post-session tasks with ample opportunity for feedback to tasks and reflection on work completed throughout the program. A summative assessment was done in the culminating interview using oral assessment. During this conversation, faculty were able to expand upon the ideas and themes that were noted in the reflective essays to provide a rich dialogue during a 45-minute consultation. In the consultation meeting, the program director stressed that the learning journey is ongoing and will continue during the participant's teaching at St. Georges University and throughout their career. All the tasks and activities are considered as works in progress that the faculty members can apply, review and continually adapt to new teaching situations.

The final summative assessment and signoff for achievement of a certificate's outcomes comes

### Table 2
*Major Themes and Representative Comments*

| Theme | Representative Comments |
| --- | --- |
| Growth Mindset | Core Sessions: |
| Professional Identity Formation | "For me, in every session there was something new. I had heard about some of the ideas before, but not in a way that I could apply them. Working towards this teaching certificate has opened my eyes to many new and exciting concepts I had never really thought of or even considered." |
| Transforming Approaches to Teaching | "As a result of this course, my teaching philosophy and strategies have changed." |
| Thinking about the Learner | "I realize now I can incorporate active learning into even my large classes. I'm thinking more about how my students learn and what helps with deep learning." |
| Intention to Apply Strategies | "I would like to implement a small change with the hopes of starting to develop more of a universal design in my courses. I hadn't thought about invisible disabilities before – I'm going to make changes to my power points and use close captioning in audio visuals." |
| Application of Strategies | "I was able to use the rubric I designed and put it into the online course management system." |
| Benefit of the Professional Learning | "For me, in every session there was something new. The in-class activities and interactive nature of the classes I thought were key to making it fun and rewarding." |

from the program director. During the final consultation, they review the folder of completed tasks with the faculty member, listen to the reading of the reflective paper, ensure attendance at all sessions and completion of all tasks, and discuss next steps.

Our research found that the use of folio thinking, dialogic curriculum, and oral assessment provided meaningful learning for our faculty. We recommend incorporating these elements into curriculum design and assessment for faculty development programs. The faculty participants in our program reported that they enjoyed our approach to the design of the certificate program and found the assessment meaningful and relevant. We welcome a chance to engage further with other faculty developers to discuss how this approach can be used and improved in other settings.

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# Biographies

Shannon Rushe (M.Ed) is a former Educational Developer at St. George's University and currently a Learning Specialist and Program Coordinator at the University of Guelph.

Diane Salter's leadership roles in higher education include Director of Faculty Development, SGU, Grenada; VPTL, KPU, BC; Dean Curriculum and Faculty Development, Sheridan, Ontario. Diane, based in BC, consults internationally.