

Fellowship Report

'Structured vivas as accommodated assessment for dyslexic students'

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, congratulations and thank you to Costas Kontos, BA (Hons) Sound Arts Design for his submission of his dissertation as a viva voce and for his support in disseminating the products of the fellowship by delivering his experience of the process to the Writing Pad conference and being 'cool' about disclosure.

I would also like to thank colleagues across the University, particularly those in Study Support who offered their advice and paying specific tribute to Gaynor Gray for her editing, IT skills and for lessening the strain on my vocal cords by participating in the recording of the audio guide. It follows then, that I should thank Ciaran Harte for his invaluable help in ensuring good sound conditions and then being patient enough to record the audio handbook.

Glyn Bell deserves credit for obtaining funding from Hertfordshire Local Education Authority to support a student in a new venture and Hertfordshire LEA should be thanked for advancing the money so painlessly to this effect - hopefully a precedent.

Synopsis

The central goal of this report was to produce guidelines in audio and written form for dyslexic students wishing to undertake accommodated assessment, specifically the viva voce within creative degrees at UAL.

The avenues of exploration were to work with course teams and students in advancing the accessibility of the viva. This was ambitious and only one team within one school had to review their learning outcomes and participate in the process of implementing the viva.

One case study was documented and completed as the time frame and support did not permit any other candidates to apply for accommodation.

An innovative approach to teaching, learning and assessment was achieved and dissemination of material has started to take place.

Contributions to CLTAD and other conferences were made as noted and referenced. Staff development will be undertaken on the teaching certificate programme at CLTAD.

Planned developments arising from the fellowship include the compilation of an educational pack, which will be distributed internally within the University and sold externally.

Process and Products

I began my research by approaching the colleges through their respective dyslexia and study support co-ordinators, ascertaining attitudes and interest in the notion of oral assessment. Feedback from meetings and selected interviews from doctoral research work gave me an insight into perspectives and existing practices of assessment. In principle, there was no opposition to the concept but some fears or disgruntled responses were voiced from those who had anxieties over time constraints in establishing or delivering any 'alternatives' and those who worried over 'academic standards.'

Anxieties concerning disability equalities were easily calmed, for example; could a student on a print journalism degree undertake a viva in lieu of their dissertation? This is self evidently an 'unreasonable request'; the learning outcomes of print journalism, abilities with text, communication and accuracy are the core of the programme - to evade them would not meet the fundamental criteria of the course. The viva would not reflect the measurement of the intended academic journey. However, a student dedicated to broadcast journalism may be better placed to undertake a viva.

In supporting the few dyslexic undergraduates who opted for journalism, I never met any who suggested they wanted extra time - even the right to disclosure of their disability was not given to me. It seemed fitting in January 2006 that the first viva should be on a BA (Hons) Sound Arts Degree; if not audio here, then where?

Quality administrators in the Colleges provided me with disks containing full handbook contents of the learning outcomes. In examining the learning outcomes of the programmes, I perceived both the common features and unique identity of programmes. All programmes asked for the students to have demonstrated knowledge, interpretation and evaluation of the key areas identified as the core of the programme.

All students had to be presenting and demonstrating their skills within an analytical and critical framework; locating sources, exploring, identifying, ethically investigating and aesthetically judging; synthesising theory and practice and generally employing the references of the subject benchmarks within their discipline. **The content of the viva would depend on course teams analysing their own learning outcomes in relation to oral assessment.** This is a vital premise which gives ownership to the team and embeds connoisseurship. Guidance was required rather in the nature of what was reasonable as expectations of a student oral performance - what length? What mode? And the operation of 'real time'.

The next stage of research formed the hypothesis – *How can the learning outcomes be demonstrated in an oral form?*

The oral form reserved for doctorates or borderline passes in the U.K. is the viva voce; this oral performance includes a defence of one's subject area and not just a presentation. It was, and remains, common in Italy as a form of assessment for Higher Education. The living voice seemed more engaging - better suited to dyslexics who had difficulties with written work; anti-plagiaristic it generally offered a framework of academic rigour. The viva voce as a vehicle of assessment endorsed the SENLEF principles of Effective Practice in that it:

- facilitates reflection and self assessment - in delivery and response to feedback
- encourages Teacher and Peer Dialogue - the dissertation becomes live and engaging
- demanding but encouraging forms of supervision, giving internal verifiers a new, lively role with colleagues
- offers clear descriptors of performance
- expresses high quality information - no plagiarism or regurgitation but courageous attempts to express learning
- promotes motivation - for dyslexic students a new form of assessment is the motor of change and allows strengths to be revealed
- fosters research - which may be more effectively demonstrated in this new mode.

Firstly, whilst students undertaking a viva voce have preferred to make an oral submission of their mastery of discourse competence in their subject', they are not individuals presenting using primary orality, but students using secondary orality, i.e. they have read, seen and absorbed the arguments and language of their discourse.

The student is required to research, consult with supervisor(s) and be following an academic enquiry, collecting evidence from data, works of art, interviews, texts or using the web. They have to be familiar with key concepts of their discipline and be aware of the theorists in the field that may support their argument. The work must show depth and understanding and reflect the academic journey expected of an undergraduate. It is only the vehicle that alters. Holistically the judgement remains the same.

The dissertation handbooks for colleges or courses and the demands of a discipline remain. The student is not echoing unrelated content, rather delivering an investigative account orally. The work of specialists in orality, for example Walter Ong or Ruth Finnegan, reassure staff that there are pitfalls and rewards of oral delivery. Staff development should include an appreciation of oral presentation.

Student Case Study

At the start of the spring term a student approached me about the work I was undertaking into the viva. He had been a student with the University for five years; I had assessed him as dyslexic when a Foundation student and supported him as his tutor at this time. He then progressed onto BA Photography. After two years, despite successes on his programme, he felt he wanted to explore another medium and transferred to Sound Arts Design. He was now in his final year of study. My target for students undertaking a viva was to commit to an accommodation at the end of the second year or at the proposal stage of a dissertation; this seemed fair given the needs of staff and student in preparing, documenting and supporting a new mode of assessment.

All new ventures have levels of uncertainty, rather like the risk-taking advocated within creative practice. The second year of degrees has been cited at validations (School of Media LCC 2004) as a year of experimentation and where 'fear of poor grades' should not fixate the student and prevent experimentation.

The Sound Arts student was very determined and having explained the structures and consulted staff, we decided to go ahead. The procedures are well documented in the handbook; Costas formally consented and set about confirming that everyone who should be informed, had been. This early dissemination gave time for comments and changes to any schedules. The supervisory tutor and internal verifier led us both on appropriate dates.

In reviewing the course handbook and the year 3 learning outcomes, Costas was aware of the need to express content which would be approved. References would still be required, in the Harvard style, which he set about compiling. He used the references and interviews to compile 'a walk-through' his research on the Japanese rock guitarist. The walk-through was advocated by his supervisory tutor, David Toop, to make the tasks clearer in delivery for Costas as well as the internal verifier and external examiner.

The walk-through was a collection, in reasonably chronological order, of the nature of his investigation. This did include a discography but other creative practitioners may produce more multimedia content and focus in line with their own research, aesthetic or technical inclinations. In many respects the type of creative degree will influence the production of the walk-through, mapping exercise and the delivery of the presentation.

Support sessions consisted of referring to the viva handbook, his project and texts. In looking for descriptions of sound we explored oral delivery. Costas edited work and sent work in for cross-checking, having discussed the content with his supervisory tutor.

The presentation started to build into a recognisable form when he adopted a theoretical position and decided to advance this to support his work. He responded well to critiques and in fact had to cut back his presentation by 50% by the time of his rehearsal. Costas for the

first time in his life had too much material, rather than overstretched fabric. He was eager to develop and expand ideas and had to be curtailed orally in the same manner as students have to lose words in written form. Editing was a new skill for Costas. He was empowered by deciding what worked and what failed.

Costas did have a poor recording of one interview which he realised needed 'translating' and summarising. The quality of sound recording and the need to check fluency or recorded text for accuracy became a priority. Under stress Costas also realised that he was reproducing the names of certain musical groups or words incorrectly. We did try to remedy this dysfluency and he was aware of the mistakes, so his tutors decided that this would be taken in the same spirit as a poor spelling and marginalised this in their assessment.

Fortunately, Costas had undertaken presentations as part of his degree assessment. Non-verbal communication as body language and posture was not something we needed particularly to expand upon. The design of the studio lent itself to Costas having a position of primacy on the sound suite dais above the tutors assessing him. He also had to use his laptop for the sound and any background visuals that he had chosen. Essentially, there was no surprise element in undertaking the performance. All parties had eliminated the potential for error or nerves by rehearsing and by familiarising themselves with the areas to be covered.

The rehearsal for the viva was recorded for staff as well as Costas to consider the impact of the oral presentation and the quality of the defence and questions. Generic grading criteria helped to focus on the qualities expected of Costas in presenting the viva. Being able to listen to the viva gave both parties an opportunity to revisit and consider the premise and the content of the oral assessment. The feedback was then constructive and very fair and Costas acted upon the recommendations from his draft.

Hertfordshire LEA were requested by the disability representative at Davies Street, Glyn Bell, to factor in an additional 18 hours of academic/technical support for Costas. This figure was based on additional dyslexia specialist tuition time, extra supervisory time and any technical assistance needed in creating, presenting and recording the viva. Care has to be taken to apply for funds for the student and not the University.

Supervisory tutors are permitted to claim for additional hours in enabling the student to deliver a new form of assessment. Technician time is also available to ensure that the student is able to deliver what is required effectively. It must be remembered that where there are no technical learning outcomes expressed for a particular degree, competences cannot be judged and the student will have to be enabled. Examples include Protocols, Garage 3, Photoshop and any software packages that support a student in presenting a finished product. Wherever possible in creative courses it would seem appropriate to accredit technical skills of presentation as this would allow students to enhance their performances in oral assessment without additional time or costs. The planning of a viva in the future may then include planning a pathway, which includes an elective on technical presentation skills.

The viva seemed more relaxed than the rehearsal, which on reflection was owing to the fact that the process had been undertaken before. It demonstrated the vital nature of rehearsal and the need again to plan a new vehicle of assessment in order for both parties understand and develop their roles.

The role of the dyslexia tutor as observer allowed me, as a specialist support tutor, to become more involved in the process and clearly identify what was required for the student. Hopefully, staff appreciate that the role is to support the student within the system and act as quality assurance for all concerned. Complaints procedures can make staff feel vulnerable and the greater the verification, particularly from outside the School, the greater the reassurance for staff. What is 'reasonable' is determined by a tutor qualified in the field of the disability at every stage of the schedule, rather than remaining the sole responsibility of an academic member of staff as a content specialist.

The success of the viva as accommodated assessment for Costas is evident in his feedback to others. He informally discussed the process with other students, particularly dyslexic students; there was not a flood of desire for all- change to a viva. It takes courage to adopt change or be the first. No peer felt it was an easy option, though many felt that with a longer run in time or early appreciation of such an option they might have wanted to experiment with it.

Costas delivered at the Writing Pad conference this October at Goldsmith's University, where he fervently supported the process of the viva. When tutors asked him whether he felt that having to 'defend' the oral presentation was more arduous than purely presenting a written text, he was quick to respond that questioning the candidate was a double edged sword. It does allow tutors to probe and unpack, which he felt he had few qualms about given the volume of his research, but it also allowed him to add to his presentation and take the 'audience' to areas of his strength and reinforce them. In this sense, skills of oratory and confidence, which he saw as his forte, were exercised in the same manner as the fluency with the written word that other candidates can display in a written submission. He also made the point that he could use the CD for career purposes more readily than text as a sound student. In later comments in relation to employment, Costas has pointed out that he now feels comfortable in interviews.

Critical reflection

No work would be complete without reflection on the work undertaken - a mindful eye on the work in progress and the possible constructive autocritique.

I am aware of the gap between theory and practice and that as the viva becomes a reality, involving more work and attention, there will be sceptics who will react badly to the change. Foucault spoke of *visceral clutch*, the term applied to those who had a fearful, knee jerk reaction to that which did not appear standard or palatable. Ever the optimist, I hope that the creative risk takers will outweigh the oppositional forces.

I was conscious that there was never enough time to deliver on all my own expectations. I still have to disseminate to those in teacher training as I believe that accepting reasonable adjustments for disabled students and a diverse student body should be automatic.

I have also not yet completed the full conceptual paper for CLTAD, as the theoretical development of the paper altered somewhat after the Lisbon conference feedback. [This change was followed by my father's death in June. 'Normal service has not yet been resumed' and I am still trying to re-align facets of my life. Practical matters have been the focal point as the need to change things for the better seems more imperative for me at the moment than does the debate.

Conclusions

The work has been achieved and more, but the snowball effect now requires as much time as the original fellowship. I am aware that I will need additional time to disseminate and to promote the viva. Encouraged by the University I applied for the National Teaching and Learning Fellowship, which unfortunately I did not manage to attain, however, I will be re-applying this year as I believe that the pedagogic premise of the work is both of national interest and innovative.

My original intention was to disseminate the handbook externally for wider opinion but this process was halted when I discovered a level of plagiarism. This may be a sincere form of flattery, but UAL had effectively paid for this work to be undertaken and I was conscious of defending the work until completed and marketed.

Instead, I canvassed internally and used extracts from the handbooks at conferences and at appropriate forums and conferences. The result has been an enthusiastic response from both the world of creative practitioners and dyslexia specialists. I was much encouraged by Sue Treseman at the BDA and colleagues in the Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education.

I have received support internationally from the USA, Australia and New Zealand. In the UK I have been pleased with the endorsements of those engaging in art pedagogy at Writing Pad who have helped me to disseminate the ideas and later with the practice of oral assessment for dyslexic students.

It was positive to have the notion of a defence element in the oral assessment questioned by Writing Pad members as being more onerous than work undertaken by a student submitting a written dissertation. And rewarding that the candidate who has undertaken this process of academic rigour, vigorously defended the nature of active discourse, not just flat presentation. He made the claim that it did not seem like an interrogation to be asked questions – to the contrary, it empowered him to elaborate and unpack his research, allowing him to rid assessors of doubt and to clarify and demonstrate additional knowledge of the area or identify where an issue had arisen.

The performance art team from Dartington recommended that the student be supported by a visual guide at all times to act as a prompt, reinforcement and to offer confidence to student delivering. A form of autocue seems appropriate to add to the handbooks.

I am indebted to John Woods at Goldsmith's for his pedagogic model of the tetrahedron, whereby all learning, teaching and assessment relationships can be linked through this model. I will be adopting this model in presenting the relationships of the viva between students and staff in the future. As a mode of engaging with students and their experiences it will prove to be a useful tool.

The first impact assessment will be on disseminating the handbooks and offering the students a choice - and later the effectiveness of this choice. I would like to monitor the routes of

students opting for written and oral assessment. I have already been approached by other Schools in relation to the viva being taken up by students with other disabilities, e.g. visual impairment.

The viva has already been approved in principle by Academic Affairs as it is clearly offered on the web site. The detail designed here will hopefully meet with additional support. The handbook will become an evolving work - like all handbooks - updated, critiqued and altered. If this does not happen it will suggest a much greater pedagogic flaw than if it were not based on practice and no one was engaging with this handbook.

The audio CD was recorded to a high standard in the sound studio at LCC and later refined by the senior technician. This is now receiving artwork and then being reproduced as part of a package. The handbooks are completed but a final edit and design of the front sheet will be needed for marketing the product.

Recommendations and future initiatives

1. Dissemination across the University under the auspices of the Teaching and Learning Co-ordinator; further cascaded via the disabilities group, student services and quality assurance staff across the university
2. Adhering to the new Disabilities Equality Scheme and policy documentation of 4th December 2006, the accommodation should be actively promoted by undertaking staff training, addressing Year 2 students and encouraging students to listen to or read the guidance handbooks. This may require considerable development time. I have initiated a University wide training day and started a roll-out programme at LCC and LCF
3. Owing to circumstances beyond my control, the video, which had been started with a script entitled *Do I Sound Bothered*, has not been shot. This will be possible post-Christmas with the assistance of staff and students on the FdA Media Practice course. Some funds for this project would be welcome to enable actors to be employed; the Drama department was approached but the feedback was that it was not convenient at that time.
4. The staff handbook was not created in audio form, but in line with employer obligations perhaps this should be the natural extension.
5. Despite efforts on my part to create a podcast of the handbook or turn the student viva into a podcast, this has remained problematic. It is my fervent opinion that in order for ITRDU to be effective, they need to be active within colleges, particularly in relation to Fellowships and CETL bids providing support for academic colleagues. For podcasting to remain more than a concept as part of teaching and learning initiatives in the classroom, staff require podcast software and identifiable space on the server.
6. It would appear productive to create a professional presentation elective which would be useful for all students but particularly beneficial for students seeking accommodated assessment, whether as a viva or another multimedia vehicle. It may be possible to fund additional electives through disabilities premium funding and/or widening participation funds or a similar enterprise initiative.
7. In applying for a National Fellowship, I learnt that I would need a major impact statement in relation to the viva voce - How had my work impacted on students? This was hard given the infancy of the project but I am re-submitting this year as the British Dyslexia Association is championing and publicising the handbooks to individuals across all networks.