

Oral Delivery of Essays and Oral Examinations in Classics Classrooms

Currently the prevailing practice in both university and secondary school classics classrooms is for the instructor to collect papers and tests from students and then grade them in the solitary sanctuary of his or her office or classroom. This method has clear advantages: it allows the instructors to grade in their own time and at their own pace; they can ruminate over the feedback they will give; they can deliberate with themselves over the appropriate grade. However, there are some disadvantages to this method: the length of time between the students' completion of the paper or examination and the feedback they receive on it may decrease their interest in or understanding of the feedback; students in general do not review or reread their work, so feedback given after any length of time is occasionally misunderstood, often discarded, and rarely used as a learning opportunity. This paper addresses these challenges and discusses the advantages of and a practical method for assessing students with a method at the same time traditional and unconventional in classics: oral delivery of papers and oral examinations.

Over the course of three semesters I have tested a method of giving oral feedback on papers and essays for in-translation courses (multiple sections of twelve to eighteen students) at both the honors and regular levels. When a paper is due, each student signs up for a "paper meeting," a one-on-one meeting during which he or she reads the paper aloud while I follow along on a printed copy which I have previewed before the meeting. After the student reads his or her paper, a discussion ensues, which includes, if the paper is well-written, challenges to the argument to encourage the student to defend the ideas and sharpen his or her reasoning skills. If the paper is weak in basic ways—structure, argument, or even grammar or diction—this discussion becomes more of a tutorial on the

issues the student is having trouble with, and I give instructions for how the paper could be improved. The student is then given a grade—on the spot—and asked if he or she would like to “rewrite” the paper based on our discussion. Students who choose to rewrite are required to come in for a new paper meeting during which the new paper will be discussed. This method of orally presenting and then discussing written work traces its roots back to European universities of previous centuries, but I would like to suggest the value of reviving it in American universities and schools today. There are several advantages to this system for the student. First, when the students receive feedback on their written work, they have just refamiliarized themselves with their own words and are able to follow the instructor’s critique and make note of areas that need improvement. Second, the students are given an opportunity through the instructor’s interrogation to test out the arguments in their essay and see if they are as defensible in speech as they seemed to be on paper. Third, the one-on-one meeting opens up the opportunity for the students to go deeper into the material with their instructor; in my experience paper meetings have led to many fruitful conversations about the works of literature the students had read in preparation for their papers, and these conversations went beyond what I was able to cover in lecture and classroom discussion.

Like the oral delivery of papers, oral examinations offer students immediate feedback and an opportunity to learn during and immediately following the assessment. In modern language classrooms oral examinations are commonplace and usually assess a student’s ability to converse in the target language. In my elementary Latin courses I have adopted a form of oral examination more like one that might be given in a non-language classroom. The oral examination prompts are given out in advance and require

memory work, ranging from “When speaking about verbs, what is meant by ‘person’?” to “Fully conjugate *laudo* in the indicative and subjunctive moods.” This portion of the exam addresses the need to help students distinguish between simply being familiar with forms and concepts and having *memorized* and *mastered* those forms and concepts. Students are given the opportunity to retake any question on the exam once within the exam period, which is usually one week. The students are also given, before the exam date, a short vocabulary list; at the end of the examination, the student is given several sentences to translate at sight using these words and asked to talk through their thought process either before or after they translate. This opens up the opportunity for the instructor to give student-specific instruction in reading and translation strategies to students who find the application of morphology and grammar difficult.