

# The Group Oral: An Exam Which is Not Inhuman

by Mike Arons

The group oral examination I will describe here evolved both from my own style and needs and in the context of my student and teaching experience. Obviously then I can make no claim for the value of this kind of examination for any other instructor or for other teaching contexts. I have used this examination in psychology courses at West Georgia College over the past decade, for courses which stress subject matter and for those which do not. I have used it with students who come to our program because of its humanistic orientation, but I have used it as well with students of local and more traditional vintage. I have used it with our Organizational Development students who are mostly middle aged, are linked to middle and high management slots in business, industry and the military, and whose values should, ostensibly, be more straight-laced than those of our resident students. In fact, because of the examination's across-the-board popularity and educational value, this is about the only kind of examination I now give.

In terms of mechanical procedures the group oral is easy to describe. However, since the mechanics are embedded in and are outgrowths of other good and valuable considerations, I would rather serve them up more sloppily, but in their own juices, so to speak. In essence, a group oral consists of a limited group of students from any course. I have found that below seven and over ten at a time is not good, though on occasion this rule of thumb doesn't apply. But I find eight or nine to be an optimal number. I most often use the exam as a final, because it is such a major project, as you will appreciate in a moment. But it may have greater potential as a mid-term, and many students strongly urge me to use it then as well as at the end.

Prior to the actual exam itself the students are given considerable choice as to the conditions of the examination. Generally they choose their own groups. This self-choice is based on a variety of considerations depending on the particular course or class. Sometimes students have worked all quarter in groups for discussion or projects and so forth and choose to stay in that group. Other times groups are formed on the basis of personality or intellectual compatibility - the "right chemistry." Sometimes it is simply a matter of expedience - the group forms because the members can all meet for an exam the same time, or they live in proximity to one another and want the exam arranged at some member's home. I find no problem in leaving group constitution, time and location, as well as arrangements for amenities up to the students. In fact, there is every benefit in terms of the aim of the exam in putting the students at their greatest ease and advantage. I am tempted here to raise this to the level of a humanistic principle, according to which the basic needs of the students should first be met in order for the exam to achieve meta-defensive dimensions. So often exams start out by stripping the students of every support and prop as if the only true and valid response can come from something inside a sealed up mind. The instructor controls for everything else by standardization and rigid constraints - including the "honor system."

The location of the examination is, as mentioned above, a choice normally left to the group. Since the exam is a very long one - a real social event - students may choose the place which best suits this type of event. For example, this might be some member's home or it could be a shady lawn, or a favorite corner in a restaurant or whatever. Students also choose the day and hour to the degree that these are compatible with times chosen by other groups in that class or in others I am teaching that quarter.

Scheduling with ample time in-between is essential because each exam signals its own pace and temporal needs. The briefest group oral I have ever participated in lasted 3 ½ hours, the longest (which ended up taking two sessions) 13 hours. So if one has 3 classes per quarter with, say, 70 students in all, figuring about 7 groups of 8 or 9 students, there can be no less than 35 to 40 hours of actual involvement required.

Just as students can choose their own groups, time, and location - and we have met on the "midnight to lunch shift" when a group has seen itself as "night folk" - the students also choose the way we will be sustained during the sessions - i.e., how the wine or beer will be provided, whether we will go "covered-dish" or "Chinese order-in" or "home cook." If it seems strange that I am devoting so much time to discussing the amenities and conditions under which the exam takes place, I must insist that these are matters of some importance to the students. To the degree that these amenities foster trust and a sense of community - where even competition can be viewed as mutually enhancing - these are consistent with the purpose and nature of this exam. I cannot say for sure why it is so important for students today - at least for our students to establish rapport and ambiance, but this tendency does set off by contrast the traditional one which emphasizes a separation between instructor and students and separation between students themselves.

Let us come to the moment of the examination itself. The students have already been prepared for the general format in class, and fears and concerns have been discussed. If some student has insisted on not taking that exam then I will generally accept an alternative, such as an essay exam or a paper. But most often, based on good reputation and after discussion of concerns, students look forward to the group oral.

At the start of the actual exam, I repeat the ground rules. These are as follows:

"In this little basket I have a question for each of you. Please take one. It is yours to initiate. But all the other questions are yours also to participate in. Take your question aside, now, along with any books or notes you have and any notes you might wish to take. Prepare to answer your question as fully as possible. When you are ready and when everybody else is ready we will begin. Whoever would like may then volunteer to start. That person should then give as complete an answer to the question as possible. When he or she is finished, then the question is open game for everybody. Anybody can then add to or subtract from, criticize, applaud or whatever. When we all feel that the question has been fully dealt with, or dealt with to the best of our ability at the time, we will move on the next volunteer and so forth around."

Students are actually given as much time to prepare their questions as they deem necessary and we do not begin until everybody is ready. Students who are not very adept at verbal spontaneity may write out their answers in note form, but they are encouraged to recognize the dialogue nature of the exam and to try to stretch themselves out to test their own verbal potentials. Stretch is absolutely essential to this kind of examination if it is to be successful. Let

me discuss now, then, my own role, the role of the questions, and the role of the other students in moving this exam to its desired term.

The group oral examination has proven to be a powerful vehicle for turning an exam into a learning experience. It is a natural vehicle for synergistic learning and, above all, for the encouragement of the experience of major insights from the diverse material covered in the course. But to achieve these quite desirable results it is necessary to avoid timidity and to view the experience as an art project. Indeed, the exam is high risk on a scale of success-failure because it is high risk in other senses. The outcome is far from predetermined, every examination taking its own individual course. The more happy surprises that turn up throughout the exam the better. "Unhappy surprises," happily, are reduced to a minimum because the process conspires to turn as many of these as possible into valuable insights. A student "unhappily surprised" at how far off the mark his or her answer might be is encouraged to use this as a fresh start, or other students take off from it. The examination is at its very best when its course recognizably parallels that of the creative process: characterized by tolerance for ambiguity, regression and blocking, false starts; by encouragement of fluency and excursions into bullshit, even into madness (anger and craziness); brainstorming, intuition, and the "coveting of thy neighbor's ideas"; and all of this with the aim of fostering insight, integration, and transcendence of whole over parts, but with different meanings now added to relate the latter to the former.

My own role in the examination is very important. I have no hesitation about actively involving myself in the encouragement of hot debate. I provoke or I question or I ask if the student(s) have "also considered this or that" or sometimes I just outright give an answer which I consider far superior to that given thus far, and wait for reaction. Giving such a good answer sometimes brings out the very best in the students who, until they heard my "truly great" response were responding "safely" or "timidly." Of course an opposite reaction can as easily occur. Everybody buttons up out of fear and deference for the authority. But even this provides the opportunity to discuss what is happening - as it would in an encounter group - and what seemed like a blockage can serve as an energizer. It is then easier for everybody to dialogue at a higher plane. Whatever looks like it will work to get the students up to their very best is what I will try. Because the answer to any one - or to all the questions individually - is not the goal of this examination. Concerning the questions themselves, they are ample, spacious, even extravagant. They are intentionally designed to be stretching, mind-blowing. They seem to be self contained, each dealing with a theme subject. But in fact, each of these questions overlap in potential meanings at many points. Any part of any one question can spark insight into any part of others, and when things go well there is a chain reaction. What seemed disparate as the course evolved now begins to make sense relative to one another. . . .

Let us consider how we know that an examination is going well. One sign of this is when one or several students who looked rather dumbfounded at the beginning or who were waiting to go last or who were about to give rather superficial answers to their isolated question, now show excitement and want to go next. What has usually happened is that the discussion up to this point has opened up all sorts of things - ideas, possible new relationships, heuristic tangents - which the student was unlikely to have seen in his/her question alone, in isolation. This is because each question and each discussion over it adds new dimensions, perspectives, and

ways of seeing the other questions. The questions are intentionally designed to lend themselves to what Freud would say about dreams and Ricoeur would say about all symbolic modes - they are over-determined, overcharged with potentials for meaning.

According to traditional views, the very fact that a student is prompted - by teacher or other students - to give a "better" answer than he or she was "capable of" is almost tantamount to cheating. Such traditional thinking would also be dismayed by the apparent unfairness - where a student responding later was, due to such prompting, clearly at an advantage over those who responded earlier. Likewise, it seems unfair to some students that each student has a different initiating question. One could be harder than the others, and frankly, they probably are unequal in difficulty. But if the goal of the examination is for everybody to end up with much greater insight and personal integration then it really doesn't matter who starts and who latches on to the earlier ideas to deepen the pot of insights. It must be remembered that the initiating question is not the only one according to which the student is ultimately evaluated. All questions belong to all students and when the exam goes well, he who started by volunteering - even if his response was initially uninspired - could go on to lead in integrating the remaining questions and ideas. In any event, a sure sign of the exam's full success is when everybody feels so fulfilled that initial concerns over grading, etc., tend to diminish to relative unimportance. Experiencing one's potential for deep insight is a powerful and transcending reward.

So again, when the exam goes well, the original order of volunteers or the responses to any single question lose importance; The entire consciousness of the group moves more towards the underlying principles which link the questions from below - the substrata of assumptions - and towards the implications, extensions, and ramifications which new insight and understanding now opens up. Wasn't that the real goal of education, at least its most far reaching goal? Isn't it the goal of the course? Then why should this not be the goal of the examination?

Still, practical matters like grades are required in our system, and these are not inherently evil if that's not all there is to education. On a group oral, what a student is finally graded on is how far that group has gone towards these goals of insight and integration and the opening of horizons and then - within the group - how far any individual has been able to go relative to the group consciousness achieved. The criteria which I as an instructor use for grading these exams are little different from those used in judging originality or insight and understanding on, say, an essay exam or on a term paper. In all of these cases there is the understanding that quality can be judged "subjectively" - as we judge theater and art to be good, bad, or mediocre. Conversely, I have long felt that our greatest attempts at objectivity and what can be measured by those means may preclude us from ever encountering quality of the sort which can be generated under conditions of the group oral, or of any artistic project for that matter.

But like any art, the group oral at its best offers its own special advantages relative to justice (fairness) and objectivity. In the group oral everything is as upfront as possible. There is constant dialogue and revision, constant and immediate feedback and - to the degree that both consensus and corrective processes are supports to objectivity - this exam may be one of the more objective and fair. But in the fuller educational sense, I see this exam as potentially objective in that it has served for me as a good vehicle to lead to fuller consciousness of "what is" and not merely of what is measurable by so called objective examinations.

