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Title of your paper: "Oral exam is an art form" – Danish Upper Secondary Students Attending Oral Exams in History and English

Abstract (300 words)

The presentation focuses on oral examination in Danish upper secondary high school from a student perspective. Since official law documents regarding oral exams are vague about what the exams are assessing, the aim of the paper is to investigate case-students' processes preparing for the oral exams and their investigations of its criteria. Theoretical concepts are Bitzer's Rhetorical situation's demand for a 'fitting response' (Bitzer, 1968), and Moje's concept of student navigations in a disciplinary literacy-framework (Moje, 2013). By analyzing data from a five-month fieldwork covering student interviews, students' written notes, classroom and exam observation, I ask: What is a fitting response at the oral exam in the disciplines of History and English? How do students navigate the complexities of the exam response?

In oral History-exam, the student gets 10-15 pages of unknown historical source material and has 24 hours of preparation to define questions and answer them in a presentation and a dialogue with two teacher-assessors for 20 minutes. Oral exam in English gives the student 60 minutes to read and analyze an unknown English text before the exam.

Oral examinations have only been researched sporadically in Denmark (Nissen, 2019) and only scattered internationally (Dobson, 2007; Joughin, 2003; Kvifte, 2011; Maugesten, 2011). The contribution of this study is to investigate the complexities of the intersection and transition between classroom teaching and assessment.

Results show that students struggle to express what a fitting exam response is. One case-student navigates the policy documents and the stated criteria in the classroom context, while the second case-student navigates by observing classroom interactions and *feels* criteria rather than expresses them. The third case-student was frustrated since neither documents or classroom practices were useful in her navigation towards a fitting exam response. Respecting the disciplinary boundaries proved important, even though his was never stated.

Extended summary (1000 words, excluding reference list) introduction, theoretical background, methods, preliminary findings/findings, results, reference list.

Introduction and research interest

"Oral exam is an art form" – Danish upper secondary students attending oral history exam is a part of the PhD project – "*If you waver, you're tarnished*" – *Oral exams from a student perspective*. The

project is an ethnographic exploratory investigation of students' preparatory processes and conceptions of oral exams in upper-secondary Danish schools. I followed students in the transition from the contexts of teaching and learning in the classrooms and through their independent preparation for the oral exams and asked for their reflections on the criteria for a successful performance in the exam context.

The oral exams are high stakes tests in the students' final year of study located after classroom teaching is done. The student's oral performance will result in a grade and immediate oral feedback. Since average grade is a defining factor for students' free choice of further education, it can be assumed that students will be eager to perform well. Oral exam is thus not an exercise as part of a course, but an actual rhetorical situation of great importance to the students – it requires a *fitting response* (Bitzer, 1968).

The setup of oral exams is regulated through defined learning outcomes. The content of the discipline has been object of classroom interactions during three year of study and the time frame is explicit. But quality in an oral exam response is not necessarily transparent to students. The aim of the project is to explore how students navigate to understand criteria of the oral exams. A basic assumption is that students' perception of quality in the classroom and at the oral exam influences students' processes of study and their participation in the exams. Their understanding of oral exams is acted upon when students navigate between texts, contexts and relations in order to understand the complexities of what makes a good oral exam in a particular academic discipline (Moje, 2013). There are only a few Nordic studies in oral exams focusing on the students' perspective at university level (Joughin, 2003; Kvifte, 2011; Nissen, 2019) and some covering upper secondary school level from teachers' perspectives (Borger, 2018; Bøhn, 2016). Even in the field of rhetoric, not much research has been done into how students construct their speeches (Leff, 2016).

Methods

The fieldwork was done in three classrooms in two schools for five months in the spring semester 2018. I followed 80 students aged 18-20 years old in 10 disciplines by 18 teachers. When classroom teaching stopped in May, I followed four case-students closely preparing for their oral presentation, and I observed 8 oral exams. My empirical data are fieldnotes, audio-recordings of teaching observations, formal and informal interviews, students' notebooks, pictures. Research questions were relatively open-ended inspired by ethnography to embrace field-relevant discussions (see eg (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Konopinski, 2014)). In this presentation, I focus on the three case-students' conceptions of a *fitting response* to the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968) of the oral exam as well as the fitting response analyzed from the audiotaped classroom interactions before the exam period. Furthermore, I analyze the case-students' navigations – how they act and interact with texts and relations in different contexts in order to establish understanding of what is accepted as academic disciplinary knowledge (Moje, 2013, s. 367–368).

Results

Results show that the complexities of a good exam response are not stated, investigated, or modelled in class, and students struggle to express what a fitting exam response is. One case-student navigates the policy documents focusing on coherences between documents and teaching practices and imports arguments and source materials from outside history as a discipline. The second case-student navigates by observing classroom interactions and *feels* criteria rather than expresses them, since law documents are not a valuable source of information. The third case-student was frustrated since the teacher didn't consolidate everyday answers in classroom dialogue, leaving her without a sense of exam criteria. At the exam, non-stated criteria were apparently at play: Disciplinary boundaries and a special kind of communicative competence, that students were not focusing on, were important parameters for the exam results.

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