

What the Disputatio Knew: Oral Defense, Feedback, and the Problem of Presence

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[Abstract] Online instruction has transformed feedback from a conversation into an asynchronous document: marginal comments, rubric scores, and recorded responses embedded in learning management systems. Generative AI has not created this impoverishment so much as exposed a deficiency already present in these forms of recognition. I argue that the medieval practice of oral defense offers an alternative model. In the disputatio, students demonstrated knowledge through real-time dialogue, responding to questions and challenges before an interlocutor. My claim is not nostalgic. Rather, oral defense provides a form of recognition fundamentally resistant to automation: it requires the student to be present in their knowledge, not merely to have produced an artifact of it. Drawing on my experience adapting oral defense techniques in a community college setting and on the history of the disputatio, I argue that genuine recognition cannot be reduced to written evaluation or AI-generated feedback. What is at stake, in short, is whether recognition names an encounter or merely a score.

[Keywords] oral defense, disputatio, AI, feedback, recognition

1. Introduction

Recently, I had a student turn in one of the most coherent and technically accomplished essays I have ever seen in my almost two decades of teaching. In a freshman composition seminar, mind you, the essay claimed that we have been misinterpreting Nabokov's *Lolita* all along. My hackles were immediately raised. An 18-year-old making a claim that Nabokov used the manipulative narration of his protagonist in order to expose the reader's voyeurism; that the interpretation of the novel as a romantic tale is precisely the failure that Nabokov (1955) anticipated in writing it? Come on. I have been in grad seminars where PhD candidates presented. Rarely did I hear an argument so compelling. Something fishy was definitely going on, so I invited her to come to my office hours and explain the gist of her argument.

Her answer, delivered unprompted, was that she came to the novel backwards: having watched Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation first and then read the book. Once in a while, in explaining the differences between two film versions (her argument also involved Adrian Lyne's version) she confused the facts of the book with those of the film's adaptation: attributing a certain detail to the novel, which in fact belongs to the film adaptation of it – a typical mistake anyone who reads a text and watches its adaptation is likely to make. She corrected herself mid-sentence, saying, "wait, no, that's not in the book, that's just the movie doing its usual sanitizing thing." The correction required only three seconds and no prompt from me. It was, in essence, the whole argument of her

essay: the difference between what a text actually says and what a comforting adaptation allows you to believe about it. Then, she spent an hour in my office enthusiastically discussing the film adaptations of *Lolita* in the same half-profane, half-scholarly tone as her essay. I felt embarrassed for judging her, but when eight out of every ten essays I see nowadays have obviously been written by ChatGPT, one begins to get a bit jaded. There, however, beneath the embarrassment was another realization – a subtle and more intriguing one. I had inadvertently stumbled upon the very object itself.

Generative AI has not created the impoverishment of written feedback. Instead, it has revealed an impoverishment already existing in it. Online instruction has shifted feedback from a dialogue into an asynchronous document: marginal comments, rubric scores, and recorded responses posted in learning management systems. The evaluation of student work in the learning management system is less rich compared to a conversation during office hours or a discussion of an argument. This method is sensorially deprived in the way that makes the deception – whether by AI generation or by a student performance of competence – easier to achieve.

This drift was not caused by the lack of imagination. It is rooted in the logic of scaling up. Synchronous dialogue with all students – a dialogue assumed automatically by the disputation – becomes increasingly difficult to maintain amid the course loads that contingent and adjunct faculty must teach, frequently across several institutions simultaneously, and inevitably, online. Asynchronous feedback is not only more cost-effective but also, in a limited sense, more equitable since it extends access to the students whose life circumstances do not allow them to attend a fixed-classroom hour: the parent grading papers late in the night and the student who works full days before logging on. None of this should be considered as cynical institutional logic alone. The asynchronous model solved the problem of access even though it brought a more subtle problem of recognition.

Nevertheless, this exchange has gone on unchecked for too long. It was perceived as a permanent feature of online and high-enrollment teaching. Instead, we recognized the asynchronous document as the cost of scale and access and stopped questioning what exactly it cost us.

This is not, or not exclusively, an argument that AI is bad for education. It is an argument that our model for feedback, online and in-person alike, has drifted toward the asynchronous and the documentary, and that this drift, not the technology exploiting it, is the actual failure. Face-to-face classes are not exempt: the discussion board has its analog in the silent stack of essays returned with a grade and a paragraph, no different in kind from a comment box in an LMS. What recovers the loss is not proximity but dialogue — the live, unscripted, accountable exchange in which a student has to demonstrate, in real time, what they know. Adding oral defense to writing courses does not solve a uniquely online problem; it restores a practice that both online and in-person instruction have, for different reasons, largely abandoned.

This is not a new idea. Hadn't I defended my dissertation orally and in public? Novikoff (2013) suggests that institutionalization of disputation in the medieval university transformed previous

dialectical practice into what became "the hallmark of scholastic education and a central element of academic training in all subjects" (p. 134).

But the *disputatio* was not a lecture and discussion. It was a carefully designed confrontation in which students were given assigned and exposed roles. A master presided over the discussion, raising the issue of the day and introducing the relevant authorities: "Master Simon, seated in his chair (*Symon sedet*), directed the discussions by introducing the questions of the day, supplying the necessary authorities, responding to objections, and finally offering the solution" (Novikoff, 2013, p. 137). A respondent was chosen to defend a thesis; opponents were assigned with the duty to oppose a particular thesis. Sometimes they were prepared even if "the master had to coach them beforehand over any material they would not be expected to know already" (Novikoff, 2013, p. 161).

The objective of the exercise was not consensus but confrontation. Objections were designed precisely in order to bring to light the process of understanding, which becomes evident through resistance. Without opponents pressing their point and force the student to respond, the process of demonstrating the understanding would be useless. In this framework, the questions were raised, authorities were cited, objections were raised spontaneously, and answers were requested spontaneously as well. Knowledge did not appear as a completed text submitted for evaluation. Knowledge appeared as a capability to respond – to raise an objection nobody had warned you about and to answer it anyway, at the same time as the question.

Contrary to the modern-day essay that arrives before the instructor has already completed, the *disputatio* subjected understanding to interruption. The *disputatio* saw knowledge as an activity, not a product. Not the artifact the student produced but the person able to defend it was important.

Oral defense provides a form of recognition that is essentially resistant to automation. It requires the student to be present in their knowledge and not simply to produce an artifact of it. The difference is essential because text, regardless of its origin, provides only the illusion of understanding. Even though a well-crafted paragraph cannot reveal whether the person behind it has understood the information or arranged the words in the right order; even though it can be written, re-written, rethought, and polished to a point where no doubts remain.

Oral exchange prevents this kind of editing. It demands an answer instantly when the question is asked, and what emerges in this instant – the hesitation in answering, mid-sentence corrections, readiness to admit "I'm not sure, but I think" – is exactly what no rubric can capture. The discussion board, in contrast, asks students to learn and to be assessed based on an incredibly narrowed sensorium: no voice, no face, no breath before an answer, only text submitted ready. What oral defense brings back is not just the dialogue but the sensors that the dialogue relies upon: hesitation, certainty, discoveries that cannot be expressed in written form.

This is exactly what was happening, I realize now, during that hour in my office with my student. I was not verifying her memory of the text. I was watching her think: seeing how she traced, in

real time, connections that she made in the essay, seeing how she stumbled on one question but was able to provide a better answer than in the text. Nothing that happened that hour could be captured in a transcript because it was not what persuaded me; it was how she said it – the labor of thought visible in real time.

None of this guarantees the reliability of oral defense. A good speaker can perform confidence just like a good writer can perform competence; a live questioning will not reveal every act of plagiarism. Nevertheless, it greatly increases the cost of sustaining a deception. Live performance under questioning cannot be scripted; it must withstand constantly, uninterrupted, from one question to another, unlike the written submission – drafted in private, revised later, and read only after the fact.

A second objection cuts deeper than the first. Oral performance under live questioning is not a neutral medium, and the disputatio's own history should make this obvious: it was never a level playing field. A student managing an anxiety disorder, navigating English as a second or third language, or simply unfamiliar with the cultural register of academic cross-examination may know the material as well as any confident peer and still freeze, stumble, or underperform relative to what the same student could produce in writing, with time to think and revise. To recommend oral defense without acknowledging this is to trade one form of inequity in assessment for another, no less real for being differently distributed.

This is exactly why this recommendation differs from the disputatio it is based on. The respondent in the medieval disputatio was presented to a hall of masters and peers, opponents coached in order to press the points in real time, with no chance of a second attempt and no private space for recovery. What I am recommending is a lot less ambitious and rough: a brief, low-stakes dialogue scheduled in advance, focused on clarification rather than confrontation, in which the aim is not to catch the student in a deception but to give her space to express what rubrics cannot. A student unable to perform under formal questioning could still, in a five-minute dialogue conducted in genuine curiosity rather than interrogation, express enough – in her own words, in her own time – to make her understanding clear. The disputatio gives a theoretical argument for presence. It does not, and should not, define the form this presence takes.

The practical objection to this recommendation is obvious: community college faculty do not have the luxury of medieval leisure. They teach heavily loaded sections, frequently spread over several institutions, with no space in the syllabus for an additional oral exam. Nevertheless, the recommendation is not for the return to dissertation defense – with its committee and hour-long questioning. It is for a much more modest and more attainable practice even compared to a decade ago: a brief, low-stakes conversation, conducted synchronously, in which the student is asked to talk through the essay that was already submitted.

This does not require additional technological infrastructure. Zoom, Google Meet, and the synchronous options built into most learning management systems make a ten-minute conversation logistically easy, schedulable in the time frame faculty already reserve for office hours, and

recordable if necessary. The point is not the platform but the practice: one round of questioning, conducted in real time, of an essay a student has already turned in. Does this paragraph mean what I think it means? Tell me why you chose this source. What would you say to a person who disagrees with your second point? No preparation is required from the side of an instructor. Only willingness to ask these questions and recognize that a five-minute dialogue will disclose as much as a five-page rubric.

This will not work for every essay, and it should not. Labor cost of conducting brief oral exchanges throughout the course load is real, and any rational implementation would involve selective application – to the essays where authorship is really questionable, to the essays at the beginning of the course, where establishing the rapport is crucial, and to the students whose writings suddenly changed. Disputatio was never meant to question every statement. It was designed to question those statements that mattered enough to be defended.

None of this requires a single instructor's willingness alone, though it can certainly start there. A writing program could build one round of oral check-ins into the standard sequence for a course's first major essay — not as a corrective measure aimed at suspected misconduct, but as an onboarding ritual, conducted with every student, that establishes early what kind of attention the course actually pays to written work. Practiced this way, the conversation loses whatever interrogative edge it might otherwise carry; it becomes simply how the course begins, the moment in which a student learns that their writing will be met by a person rather than only a rubric.

Scaling this practice, however, requires efforts from institutions as well as from instructors. A five-minute conversation will not be reflected on a syllabus as an assignment. It will not be counted as rigorous academic work by the department chair or accreditor who counts the pages, words, and assignments. If oral dialogue is to become more than an idiosyncratic practice of one faculty member, departments and institutions evaluating them will have to recognize this kind of listening as a legitimate assessment labor in itself – not a supplement to the real work of grading but a different kind of it. Disputatio was not kept alive in the medieval universities because they had more leisure. It was preserved because the institution that created it understood the recognition as valuable work performed in public and aloud, and this is the only thing we lack.

What is at stake, in short, is whether recognition is an encounter or a score.

References

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