Generative AI-Enhanced Oral Exams in Economics Education

Cheating on exams is a growing concern in higher education, especially with the rise of Generative AI (GenAI). This challenge is more pronounced in online/hybrid settings where traditional monitoring struggles to keep up with AI tools. We developed an innovative oral exam using GenAI in hybrid economics classes. A GenAI prompt was designed that incorporated course learning objectives and generated personalized questions that evaluated students' knowledge and provided real-time encouraging and formative feedback. Students collaborated in pairs using ChatGPT during Zoom sessions. The use of this prompt simulated a structured oral exam that elicited detailed responses, and reinforced comprehension, critical thinking, and application of key macroeconomic concepts. The approach promoted engagement and minimized opportunities for academic dishonesty, making it a practical alternative.

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1. Generative AI and Academic Integrity in Higher Education

Generative AI (GenAI) tools like ChatGPT have rapidly entered college classrooms, transforming how students learn and how educators teach. Their growing presence raises the essential question of how higher education can harness GenAI to support learning while maintaining academic integrity. This paper explores that tension by examining faculty approaches to effective assessment. According to Lo (2023), these GenAI tools are becoming easier to use and can produce accurate and detailed human-like responses to academic assignments; However, evidence from recent studies suggest that many students rely on GenAI not as a learning aid but as a shortcut. Bhullar, Joshi, & Chugh (2024) warn that such dependence undermines critical thinking and reduces opportunities for deep learning. In economics education, Geerling et al. (2023) demonstrate that ChatGPT scores in the 90th percentile on standardized exams, showing how easily it can produce high-quality academic work without genuine student engagement. These findings raise fundamental questions about what learning and assessment should look like in the age of GenAI.

Concerns about academic integrity are central to this discussion. As Cotton, Cotton, & Shipway (2024) note, AI-generated content challenges traditional definitions of authorship and originality, a concern echoed by Perkins (2023). Similarly, Dehouche (2021) emphasizes the blurred line between legitimate collaboration and academic misconduct. Scholars such as Bhullar, Joshi, & Chugh (2024), Cassidy (2023), Eke (2023), and Plata, De Guzman, & Quesada (2023) further argue that misuse often stems from unclear guidance rather than intentional dishonesty, underscoring the need for explicit institutional policies. Pudasaini et al. (2024) call for clearer policies that teach responsible use of GenAI rather than simply prohibiting its use.

Maintaining academic integrity becomes even more challenging in online and hybrid environments, where monitoring student work is more difficult. Studies by Swartz and Cole (2013) and Agha, Zhu, & Chikwa (2022) show that remote settings weaken student-instructor connections and make academic dishonesty easier for students to rationalize. Wiley (2024) and Susnjak and McIntosh (2024) add that current plagiarism detectors often fail to identify AI-generated content, signaling an urgent need to redesign assessments for the realities of digital learning.

This paper contributes to the ongoing debate about the role of GenAI in higher education by framing GenAI not simply as a threat to academic integrity, but as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation. It argues for developing new instructional models and assessment strategies that both preserve academic standards and leverage GenAI's potential to enhance student learning (Ellis, 2024).

2. Pedagogical Motivation for AI-enhanced Oral Exam

With the growing use of GenAI in education, there's an urgent need to rethink both how we assess students and how we define academic integrity. Traditional written exams may no longer accurately reflect student understanding, especially when tools like ChatGPT can generate answers with little effort. This challenge is particularly pronounced in online or hybrid classes, where conventional monitoring methods fall short of encouraging meaningful engagement with course material or detecting unauthorized assistance from GenAI tools.

To address this concern, we developed and implemented an innovative oral exam method using GenAI in a hybrid-format principles of macroeconomics course. This project integrated GenAI into the assessment process to promote academic integrity, enhance real-time critical thinking, and create a more meaningful and personalized evaluation experience for students.

Eke (2023) similarly advocates for assessment reform in response to GenAI, recommending oral exams not just as supplementary tools, but also as central components of evaluation. In fact, several other scholars have called for a return to more invigilated formats, including oral exams, as a more secure and authentic way to assess student learning (Susnjak and McIntosh, 2024). These scholars propose moving beyond traditional written assessments by incorporating interactive formats such as group discussions, presentations, and real-time evaluations. Such approaches make it more difficult for students to rely on AI tools. Incorporating real-time elements into assessments in the form of oral responses or monitored discussions can safeguard against unauthorized GenAI use and ensure a more accurate reflection of each student's understanding (Cotton, Cotton, & Shipway 2024).

3. AI-enhanced Oral Exams - Design and Implementation

A. Course Context

In Fall 2024 and Spring 2025, GenAI was integrated into multiple sections of a hybrid, flipped-format principles of macroeconomics course to enhance student engagement and learning. Each section enrolled approximately 40 students and met once a week for 75 minutes. Rather than banning tools like ChatGPT, the course adopted a guided, ethical use approach that encouraged students to use GenAI frequently, both in and out of class. This included activities such as exam reviews and oral assessments, designed to help students explore economics concepts more deeply.

To ensure equitable participation, all students used the free version of ChatGPT. No subscription-based features were required, permitting every student to participate regardless of financial limitations.

Initial Exam Structure

The first round of oral exams was conducted through one-on-one Zoom breakout room sessions without the use of GenAI. This setup created space for direct, real-time interaction between the instructor and each student. It allowed the instructor to ask follow-up questions, clear up misunderstandings in real time, and get a much better sense of each student's grasp of the material.

The approach had clear benefits, but also presented challenges. The format was time-consuming and difficult to scale. Even with a manageable class size of 40 students, it was challenging to reach everyone, let alone imagine doing so in larger classes. Not all students were able to finish the exam within the scheduled class time, which meant extra sessions had to be arranged outside of class. Coordinating those extra sessions required significant planning and effort. The experience highlighted the need for more streamlined structures to ensure that this kind of assessment is feasible and effective, regardless of class size.

While traditional proctored exams, in-person or remote, can help maintain oversight and uphold academic integrity, they are often costly and logistically demanding (Dadashzadeh, 2021). Similarly, the oral exam also presents scalability challenges, but a GenAI-enhanced version offers a more engaging and pedagogically meaningful alternative for smaller or moderately sized classes. By automating parts of the assessment process, GenAI-enhanced oral exams help streamline assessment for instructors, allowing them to focus more on in-class activities and personalized support.

B. Revised GenAI Approach

The idea for the GenAI-enhanced oral exam came from the interactive GenAI Tutor Prompt developed by Mollick and Mollick (2024), which highlights how thoughtful, custom-designed prompts can spark active learning and deeper engagement. Drawing on their GenAI Tutor Prompt and GenAI Tutor Blueprint, we adapted their model for an exam setting by redesigning the prompt to serve as a supportive, GenAI-powered examiner rather than a tutor. This oral-examiner prompt was carefully crafted to align with course learning objectives and to walk students through a series of personalized, concept-driven questions (see Appendix). Rather than just testing for the "right answer," it encouraged students to explain ideas in their own words, think critically, and relate what they learned to real-world situations or personal insights.

We intentionally designed the experience to feel more like a conversation than a high-pressure exam. The tone of the GenAI was supportive, and the questions were structured to guide students step-by-step through the material. Additionally, to encourage collaboration, students completed the oral exams in pairs. Students were given two weeks before their first test to choose their own group mates. This was an intentional strategy to help them practice decision-making and identify peers they could collaborate with effectively. Those who didn't pair up by that point were placed in instructor-defined pairs based on class attendance and in-class participation.

The exam was conducted using Zoom breakout rooms and the student pairs interacted with the exam prompt in GenAI together. This format helped students feel more at ease, boosted their confidence, and led to some genuinely thoughtful conversations. What we saw confirmed that when GenAI is used in a structured, student-centered way, students perceive it as supporting engagement and deeper thinking about learning tasks (Chan & Hu, 2023).

C. Monitoring and Assessment

To monitor and assess the GenAI-enhanced oral exams, we used a layered approach that combined student interactions with ChatGPT, and a follow-up multiple-choice quiz on Gradescope. Throughout the process, the instructor would periodically drop into Zoom breakout rooms to support the experience and make sure students were engaging meaningfully with both the GenAI and their partners. These informal check-ins helped keep students on task, and the group format itself added an extra layer of accountability. Working in pairs encouraged collaboration and reduced the temptation to let GenAI do all the work. In fact, many students offered more thoughtful responses simply because they were bouncing ideas off a peer in real time.

For assessment, we used the GenAI Teaching Assistant Blueprint (Mollick and Mollick, 2024), which helped us create a grading prompt that aligned the course goals within the grading rubric. We were mindful of privacy from the start. Since ChatGPT processes information outside of our institution's systems, we took care to protect students' data. No personally identifiable information was included in GenAI transcripts or prompts, and we used pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. This approach allowed us to experiment with GenAI in a way that was altogether innovative, respectful of student rights, and aligned with both the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and institutional privacy policies.

4. Findings: Student Experience and Outcomes

A. Benefits of GenAI-Enhanced Oral Exams

GenAI-enhanced oral exams offer a range of benefits that improve the testing experience for students. In this study, students experienced a more engaging and interactive format, with questions tailored to their understanding and real-time feedback that encouraged deeper thinking. These findings align with prior work highlighting the potential of GenAI to support personalized, interactive assessment experiences (Arslan et al, 2024). Survey responses and instructor observations showed that students felt more motivated and preferred this new approach over traditional tests. The format also helped reduce opportunities for cheating and showed potential for scalability in larger classes. A recent survey confirms that many college students enjoy using GenAI as part of their academic experience (Mowreader, 2025).

In informal course evaluations for the principles of macroeconomics course, students described the format as more engaging and less stressful than traditional exams. They appreciated the conversational tone and opportunity to think aloud. More specifically, several students highlighted the innovative approach as "a cool change" and "way more interactive than just filling in bubbles." One student shared, "I was surprised and excited to learn that I can use ChatGPT in this way. This really shows how innovative that we can get with AI to learn and progress in all sorts of different ways." Another noted, "I didn't expect to like it, but it helped me understand the material better." Even those who were initially skeptical found it surprisingly helpful: "I was nervous at first, but the AI made it feel more relaxed."

Further, the students' evaluations also praised the adaptive nature of the experience. One student remarked, "It makes you go into further detail if your answer is not fully thought out, and if you get it incorrect, it will give you another chance to answer." Another appreciated how the tool fostered real-world connections, saying, "I liked how it asked me to relate concepts to real-life examples." Another observed, "If you get the answer wrong, it explains and asks you a similar question, which further helps us learn and understand the material."

B. Why Oral Exams matter in the GenAI era

Oral exams are known as a powerful way to truly understand what students know, much more so than traditional written tests. They push students to think on the spot, explain their reasoning out loud, and have a real-time conversation with their instructor (or peers, in this case). This structure makes it harder to fall back on memorized answers or GenAI-generated content. Instead, students must engage, recall, and apply what they have learned in a more flexible and meaningful way.

What also makes oral exams stand out is the opportunity for immediate feedback from peers as well as the instructor. In the setup considered in this paper, students worked in pairs and chatted freely with each other in Zoom breakout rooms as they responded to GenAI-generated questions. Prior research on peer instruction shows that when students can talk through their answers with a peer, they think more carefully about their reasoning, and this makes the assessment more collaborative and learning oriented (Tullis and Goldstone, 2020).

The instructor would periodically drop into each breakout room to listen in, ask follow-up questions, and offer clarification if needed. This light-touch presence helped keep conversations on track while giving students the space to express their understanding in their own way. In a hybrid or online environment, where it can be easy to disengage or feel isolated, this approach creates a more connected and authentic learning experience, while maintaining academic rigor and reducing the temptation to rely on shortcuts.

While much of the focus around GenAI in higher education has been on academic integrity, recent research points to broader concerns. Crawford et al. (2024) found that students who rely on tools like ChatGPT for support may experience reduced social interaction, lower wellbeing, and a weaker sense of belonging. These findings highlight the importance of preserving human connection in learning and support the use of oral exams not just for academic rigor, but also for fostering meaningful engagement. Utilizing breakout rooms for student pairs to complete the oral exams, fostered collaboration and peer-to-peer dialogue. This atmosphere supported students' sense of connection within an online environment. One student shared, "It felt more like a conversation than a test. I could actually explain what I knew."

5. Challenges, Lessons, and Future Direction

This study did not include a traditional or non-oral exam comparison group, as the GenAI-enhanced oral exam was implemented across all course sections in the same semester. The findings therefore reflect student experiences using GenAI-enhanced oral exams rather than comparisons across formats. Future work will explore these comparisons.

In addition to the benefits outlined in the previous section, it is important to consider the challenges GenAI-enhanced exams present, particularly as more instructors plan to adopt these methods. One common challenge is that AI-generated responses to in-class prompts could sometimes contain errors. When students are able to identify these errors, the process can actually deepen their knowledge. However, without proper guidance, there is a risk they might accept incorrect information as accurate. The identification of GenAI errors turned into valuable teachable moments about GenAI hallucinations and the need for critical thinking when using GenAI. These instances highlighted the importance of evaluating AI-generated information rather than accepting it at face value, and of speaking up when something seems off instead of doubting one's own understanding (Beck and Brodersen, 2025). These errors underscore the need for well-crafted prompts and instructor oversight.

Despite these benefits, this approach may not work well for all learners, especially those with diverse needs. For students with delayed processing disorders, this fast-paced, conversational format can create added pressure, making it difficult for them to organize their thoughts or respond confidently without additional time or other accommodations. We realize that existing university policies may not cover innovative assessments like this one. However, when an accommodation was needed, we collaborated with the campus disability services office to determine the most appropriate support for the student. In one case, the student was granted extended time and allowed to complete the exam individually outside of class. Alternatively, students could be placed in instructor-defined pairs with peers who demonstrated patience and willingness to engage supportively. These adjustments would ensure that all students engage meaningfully with the material in a format that respected their individual learning needs.

Another limitation concerns group composition. Most pairs were self-selected, while only a few were assigned by the instructor. Because the number of instructor-assigned pairs was small, we cannot make meaningful statistical comparisons between the two types of groups. Informal observations suggested that self-selected partners tended to collaborate more smoothly due to prior rapport, whereas instructor-assigned pairs sometimes required additional guidance to work effectively together. Future implementations will collect more structured data to examine how partner assignment may influence learning outcomes.

Given that English is the language of instruction at our institutions, all course activities, including GenAI-enhanced oral exams, were conducted in English. While we did not encounter language-related issues in our implementation, we acknowledge that oral exams may pose

additional challenges for non-native speakers. Instructors planning to implement oral exams could have open conversations with students early in the semester to identify their needs and how best to support them. Instructors can encourage non-native speakers to ask clarifying questions of the GenAI, such as rewording or further explanation of prompts. Further, the instructor can pair native and non-native speakers. These remediation strategies allow non-native speakers to benefit from both peer support and GenAI assistance.

Designing GenAI prompts requires time, as does reviewing students GenAI interactions to ensure the quality of student responses and alignment with course learning outcomes. Faculty training is essential, and some instructors may resist adopting GenAI tools. Most importantly, GenAI should support the instructor's role in evaluating student learning, rather than replace it, to ensure that the assessment process is fair and trusted by all involved.

The GenAI-enhanced oral exam was implemented by one author across multiple sections of a hybrid-format principles of macroeconomics course. Now that the approach has proven effective in a hybrid setting, we are beginning to explore its adaptation for asynchronous online courses. For example, one of the authors piloted a related GenAI tutor-style prompt in an asynchronous Health Economics course. While this setting did not include the same oral exam format, it demonstrated the potential to extend GenAI-assisted assessment into flexible learning environments. Further, GenAI reading logs and exams will be incorporated into an asynchronous Intermediate Microeconomics course. These efforts will inform the next phase of our work as we continue refining the model for broader application across different instructional formats.

Exploring a range of emerging tools, such as Copilot, Perplexity, and Gemini, may further broaden the possibilities for assessing learning in dynamic and personalized ways. Regularly gathering student feedback will also be essential for fine-tuning the approach and ensuring it remains engaging and effective over time.

6. Best Practices and Conclusion

To make GenAI-enhanced exams work well in the classroom, a few best practices can go a long way. One helpful approach is to start with a low-stakes practice run so students can become comfortable with the format and build confidence without the pressure of a grade. Clear communication is also essential. Students benefit from knowing how GenAI is being used, what aspects ChatGPT is evaluating (like clarity, accuracy, or reasoning), and how much that matters compared to the instructor's own assessment. It is also important for instructors to always review AI-generated responses, especially when they count toward a grade. While templates like the GenAI Teaching Assistant Blueprint (Mollick and Mollick, 2024) offer a helpful starting point, prompts should be tailored to fit the course.

This initiative grew out of two main challenges: growing concerns about cheating with GenAI and the time-consuming nature of traditional oral exams. It also presented an opportunity to explore GenAI as a structured tool for meaningful assessment. By guiding students through personalized, interactive questions, this approach makes assessments more engaging while helping protect academic integrity. When used thoughtfully, GenAI can strengthen the learning experience, help students think more deeply, stay more engaged, and feel more connected to the material without taking the place of meaningful instructor involvement.

This approach offers a practical model for faculty interested in integrating GenAI tools like ChatGPT into oral assessments. The approach is flexible, and the template can be adapted for other disciplines and course formats. By fostering more interactive, personalized, and ethical evaluations, GenAI-enhanced exams can support deeper learning and uphold

academic integrity, particularly in hybrid and online courses. While the approach is not without challenges, it provides a scalable alternative that still draws on the instructor's expertise and judgment. With thoughtful implementation and ongoing refinement, faculty can use GenAI as a meaningful support tool that enriches, rather than replaces, the human element of teaching and assessment.

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Appendix A: Oral Examiner Prompt (Macroeconomics)

You are Dr. G's engaging, upbeat, and encouraging oral examiner for Test #3. Your job is to assess student understanding of GDP, including how it's measured, what its components are, and what it reveals about economic performance.

Begin by introducing yourself with: "Hello! I'm here to test you on GDP—how it's measured, what its components are, and how it reflects economic activity."

Students will be working in pairs. Ask for the students' names - first name and last initial. Wait for each student to respond before beginning the questions. Then, ask one question at a time, alternating between the two students by name. For each question, use a paired-question format. Ask one student a question from the list below. After one student responds, ask another student a related but different question that explores the same topic from another angle. Switch up who has the first question among the pair.

Use each of the 10 questions below as an anchor and generate a parallel question for the other student before moving to the next pair.

If a student gives a vague answer (like "I know this"), politely ask them to give a complete definition with examples. If the student gives an incorrect answer, allow one more try—but do not provide the correct answer or hints.

Encourage clear and confident responses. Use phrases like: "Great job! You're getting the hang of this!" "Nice explanation—keep going!" "Good thinking! Let's go a little deeper."

Here are the 10 anchor questions you'll build pairs from:

1. "Can you describe the 'Consumption' component of GDP and give examples?"

2. "Could you explain what counts as 'Net Export' in GDP?"

3. "What do we mean by 'Government Spending' as a component of GDP?"

4. "If Michelin sells tires to Toyota for a new Camry built in the U.S., does this count toward GDP? If so, under which component?"

5. "Imagine you help your neighbor babysit her children on weekends. Does this count toward GDP? Why or why not?"

6. "Your friend receives unemployment benefits. Is this part of GDP? Explain why/why not."

7. "If a country's nominal GDP increases year-over-year, does that always mean it produced more goods and services? Why or why not?"

8. "What's the purpose of selecting a base year when calculating real GDP?"

9. "What are some limitations of GDP as a measure of a country's well-being?"

10. "Can you think of a case where GDP increases but quality of life does not?"

After completing all 10 pairs (20 total questions), if student did well, wrap up with:

"Well done! You have a solid grasp of GDP concepts." If not, end with an encouraging note. Then say: "Next, scroll to the top of the ChatGPT page and click the SHARE button. Copy the link and submit it in Gradescope. Then proceed to Gradescope to complete your 10-question quiz."