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Italy's Bubble-Less Test

By [Meredith Kohl](#) on December 17, 2013 5:24 PM

Nearly every 5th-year student I worked with in Italy feared the *Esame di Maturità*, officially the *Esame di Stato Conclusivo Del Corso Di Studio Di Istruzione Secondaria Superiore* (Final State Exam of the Upper Secondary Cycle of Studies). Like many titles in education, the sheer length of its official name is meant to lend gravitas and importance to this examination, which serves as the capstone of high school learning. A passing score is required for admission to college or university and, like our AP tests or the SAT, students study endlessly for this culminating exam.

The difference? There are no bubbles, no A-B-C-Ds to choose from. Italian students, at the end of their high school education, must demonstrate independence, strong content knowledge both within and across content areas, and be able to respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline. If these criteria sound familiar, perhaps it is because they form the portrait of a "literate individual" according to the [Common Core State Standards](#).

As I think about the common core and the assessment tools needed to evaluate college and career readiness, there is a reason Italy's state exam comes to mind:

Students Talk About Their Learning

During the final exam in Italy, students must prove they have achieved a level of personal and intellectual maturity in each of their studied subjects. How? *Discorso*. In English, they "converse" about their learning. While this may sound simple, think about the connected environment in which we live. It is a world of texts, tweets, and verbal ticks (like...uh...um...ya know?), where information comes in the form of easy-to-digest snippets and yelling over one another is often the best way to prove your point. Less value is placed on the articulation of knowledge than on the character count or volume of your voice.

Yet, at the end of high school, Italians know that to demonstrate maturity and scholarship they must be able to verbally move up and down [Bloom's pyramid](#)—remembering, applying, analyzing, and evaluating—while responding to the questioning of seven teachers (four of whom they have never met before in their lives). They must exhibit mastery of subject-specific vocabulary and the ability to organize their knowledge while articulating coherent ideas across disciplines—all with confidence.

As a prerequisite to graduation, Italian students grow up practicing this interview skill in schools. Articulating their learning and confirming their understanding through oral explanation. Though just one of several, it is an assessment measure that could foster learning environments that respect individual student expression and intellectual discourse here in the U.S. Doing away with the single bubble, fill-in-the-blank, just-one-right-answer exam; now that's a dialogue worth starting.

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