

Science Slam & University Teaching: Encouraging Students to Explore Interests and Shape Academic Identity

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Abstract

This article presents Science Slam as a teaching format in higher education and discusses its didactic potential. A transferable course design is introduced, combining student autonomy, creativity, and academic learning. Evaluation through a Teaching Analysis Poll indicates that students particularly valued the freedom to choose topics and connect personal interests with academic work. The article suggests that Science Slams can foster motivation, creativity, and engagement with course content.

Keywords

Science Slam; Higher Education; Student-Centered Learning; Individualization of Teaching; Creativity

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Background & Context

A *Science Slam* is a format of science communication in which researchers present their scientific work to a non-specialist audience in short, engaging presentations. These presentations typically combine rigorous scientific content with an entertaining, often humorous performance. The format is usually structured as a competition, with the audience evaluating the presentations through voting. The primary aim of a Science Slam is to make scientific topics accessible in innovative ways to a broad public and to foster dialogue between science and society. In Germany, the first Science Slam was held in 2006 (Grummt, 2018; Westermayr, 2013).

This article aims to present Science Slam as a teaching format in a way that can be readily adopted by interested teachers. Its significance stems from both its broad applicability across disciplines and its potential to spark genuine interest and active engagement among students.

Integrating Science Slams into higher education allows instructors to utilize the creative potential of teaching by introducing a novel format of knowledge transfer (Grummt, 2018), providing students with a space to engage personally with scientific content. The core idea is that students prepare and deliver a five-minute Science Slam on a self-chosen topic within the field of qualitative social research (e.g.,

methodology, practice, or a qualitative study) presenting it in a manner that is both entertaining and academically accurate (Niemann et al., 2020). The five-minute format was chosen to accommodate the number of students enrolled in the course and to allow sufficient time for both presentation and reflection within a single session. Depending on class size and learning objectives, instructors may choose longer presentation formats (e.g., 5–10 minutes) to provide students with greater flexibility and depth.

As part of the seminar accompanying the lecture *Qualitative Research Methods* in the Bachelor's program in Sociology at Chemnitz University of Technology (Germany), students (most of whom have little prior practical experience with these methods) are expected to deepen and apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in the lecture. Approximately 20 participants in this mandatory seminar gain hands-on experience in qualitative research methods e.g. by conducting observations, creating an interview guide, and analyzing drawings.

In order to successfully complete the seminar, students are also required to submit three written exercises distributed over the course of the semester. To complement the traditional written exercises with an innovative alternative, a Science Slam is introduced as a form of assessment. This format allows students to actively experience this method of science communication. The other two

exercises required for completing the course involve transcribing a five-minute interview (independently selected on YouTube), and subsequently coding the resulting text using MAXQDA.

Learning Objectives

The following learning objectives were formulated for the seminar with reference to Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1976; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Overall Goal

Through the Science Slam, students engage with a self-chosen topic in qualitative social research, explore their individual interests, and develop both an investigative and creative mindset. In doing so, they strengthen their autonomy and creativity in scientific work and communication, enabling them to convey complex topics in a thorough and engaging manner, an essential competence across various professional contexts.

Remembering & Understanding

- Students can identify individual concepts and methods of qualitative social research and explain and present their fundamental characteristics.

- They discuss the role of science communication and reflect on its importance for the dissemination of qualitative research findings.
- Students experiment with various communication strategies and test a novel form of science dissemination.

Applying & Analyzing

- Students identify their own areas of interest within qualitative social research.
- They analyze existing Science Slam contributions with regard to their scientific, narrative, and performative elements.
- Students employ creative techniques to present scientific content in an understandable, and entertaining way.

Evaluating & Creating (including affective learning objectives)

- Students critically reflect on the challenges and opportunities of popularizing research.
- They develop their own Science Slam concept that is both scientifically rigorous and effective for a public audience.
- Students present their Science Slam to an audience and evaluate the impact of their performance and the clarity of their content.
- Students cultivate an investigative attitude and experience science as a creative process.
- They independently design their Science Slam, experiencing themselves as active producers of knowledge.

Ultimately, these objectives foster not only methodological and communicative skills, but also a reflective and creative mindset, empowering students to move beyond passive consumption of knowledge toward actively producing and shaping it themselves.

Didactic Challenges & Pedagogical Approach

Course Topics

To ensure relevance, Science Slam contributions are closely linked to the learning objectives of the seminar such as a theory, a methodological approach (data collection or analysis), or an empirical study. At the same time, the format remains open enough to inspire exploration beyond standard methodological boundaries, fostering creativity while maintaining a strong connection to the course content.

Student Motivation

Not all students feel comfortable speaking in front of others or experimenting with creative formats. For some, the Science Slam may represent an

additional challenge, particularly if they have little prior experience with such tasks. To address this, it is emphasized that the focus lies on content understanding rather than on perfection. Students experiencing presentation-related anxiety may also opt for alternative forms of participation, such as short video submissions or non-presenting roles within group work.

To reduce anxiety and build confidence, preparation is structured in guided stages, allowing students to develop their ideas step by step without feeling overwhelmed by the overall task. A workshop-style session introduces various presentation techniques that are not only useful for the Science Slam but also applicable in other professional contexts.

Students' motivation is further supported by the opportunity to choose a topic within a broad framework. Collaboration in pairs or small groups (2–3 students) is optional and might add another motivational layer, as students can choose whether to work individually or jointly develop and deliver their Science Slam contribution. Mutual support enhances confidence and encourages a creative approach to the chosen topic.

Complex Format with Significant Flexibility

The Science Slam requires a careful balance between scientific accuracy and creative communication.

There is a risk that content may be oversimplified or distorted in favour of entertainment. To address this, clear quality criteria are established to ensure both scientific rigor and creative expression.

As a complex format offering considerable flexibility, the Science Slam presents a challenge for students. This flexibility is intentionally designed to reflect real-world situations, where researchers must navigate vast topics and selectively focus on key aspects. This challenge encourages students to think beyond conventional boundaries, experiment with new presentation techniques, and explore innovative ways of communicating their work.

Quality Criteria

The Science Slam presents a central challenge in balancing academic rigor with creative expression. Without clear guidance, students may struggle to maintain scientific accuracy while experimenting with innovative presentation formats. To address this challenge, students collaboratively develop quality criteria. This joint process encourages reflection on how creativity and scientific accuracy can coexist and provides guidance on giving and receiving constructive feedback.

Time Management

Preparing a Science Slam can be more time-consuming than traditional assignments, potentially posing challenges for students with heavy workloads. Early topic selection, structured milestones, and feedback sessions during preparation help manage this task. The Science Slam is introduced at the beginning of the semester, followed by mid-semester feedback and in-class work for further development, with presentations scheduled towards the end. While the format requires both intellectual and creative engagement, preparation is supported through guided tasks and reflection, keeping the overall workload balanced.

Course Planning & Science Slam Workshop Implementation

At the beginning of the semester, students are informed as part of the course planning that they will develop and present a Science Slam. The rough semester structure consists of an initial workshop for introduction and idea generation, a follow-up session three weeks later to review progress, and a final presentation day at the end of the semester (Figure 1). The following section focuses on a detailed description of the workshop to enable replication. Table 1 presents the main topics discussed during the workshop (potential topics and content, quality

criteria, and presentation formats). Table 2 provides an overview of the overall workshop.



Figure 1: Science Slam activities: Semester overview

Workshop

Welcome

The session begins with an overview of the planned schedule and the main learning objective: introducing the Science Slam format and generating initial ideas for students' own contributions. At this stage, the focus is on familiarization with the format rather than producing a complete Slam presentation.

Organizational aspects of the assignment were clarified:

- Preparation of a 5-minute Science Slam
- Topic: self-selected within qualitative research
- Work individually, in pairs, or in groups of three
- Opportunity for discussion on the Science Slam in the follow-up session

Background: Science Slam & Science Communication

At the beginning of the session, students are invited to share where they typically obtain their scientific information. This serves to anchor the introduction in their own experiences while encouraging reflection on how scientific knowledge is received and interpreted. A brief input then follows on the Science Slam format (Westmayr, 2013) and the broader role of science communication (Cheng et al., 2008). Core aspects of its objectives and the relevance of effectively conveying scientific content are presented. In a subsequent plenary discussion, potential drawbacks of the increasing popularization of science are also addressed, for example, the risk of oversimplification or the perception of science as mere entertainment.

Learning Objectives

Before moving into the main working phase, a short pair-share activity is introduced. Students are invited to share their thoughts on the following questions:

- What do I want to learn from creating a Science Slam?
- Which of these skills are transferable to my future professional life?

This activity enables students to take greater ownership of their learning process, encouraging

them to reflect on their own motivation as well as the practical relevance of the format.

Subsequently, the instructor outlines the overarching learning objectives for the session:

- Gaining familiarity with a new form of science communication
- Identifying personal research interests
- Developing a creative stance as researchers

By combining self-reflection on individual goals with the identification of transferable skills, the activity highlights its value for both the personal and professional development of students.

Use of AI

Students are encouraged to independently develop their Science Slam contributions while engaging critically with supportive technologies. AI use is explicitly not prohibited, yet students are reminded that the Slam draws on their personal interests and individuality. Rather than producing a flawless text, the goal is to create an authentic expression that reflects their curiosity and unique style. This approach fosters independent scholarly effort while promoting a reflective use of AI. Discussing the use of AI in the context of developing a Science Slam may also provide an opportunity to critically reflect on the

relationship between generative AI and creativity. While some studies suggest that AI can support idea generation and creative processes, others point to potential challenges regarding independent creative thinking (Habib et al., 2024; Toma & Yáñez-Pérez, 2024). Discussing these tensions with students may encourage a more reflective use of AI in academic learning contexts.

A poor practice Science Slam

In this part of the session, the instructor presents a personal Science Slam. Students typically show high engagement as they recognize the personal nature of the contribution. The presentation is deliberately framed as a *poor practice* example, following inverted problem solving, inviting students to consider how they might approach it differently (Dieterich, Rumann & Rodemer, 2025). They provide constructive feedback, including suggestions to clarify the topic, strengthen its connection to qualitative research, avoid merely reading from a script, and employ media more strategically. This interaction prompts students to start reflecting on potential ideas for their Science Slam presentations.

World Café

The core segment of the seminar involves a modified World Café approach (Löhr, Weinhardt & Sieber, 2020), designed to collaboratively generate ideas

and inspiration for the students' Science Slam projects. Following a brief introduction to common creativity techniques (Leopoldino et al., 2016) (e.g., brainstorming, mind mapping, the Six Thinking Hats), three thematic stations are set up: (1) potential topics and content, (2) quality criteria, and (3) presentation formats. Students are randomly assigned to the groups. Each group begins at one station, generating ideas and writing them on a poster. Some of these ideas are illustrated as examples in table 1. Groups then rotate through the stations, building upon the ideas already documented by previous groups. The instructor circulates among the groups, observing the flow of work and occasionally providing brief prompts.

This format proves highly effective: even in the final round, students continue to contribute new ideas. Notably, more reserved students actively participate, and the extended working phase allows time for them to ‘warm up’. Finally, the groups briefly presented their results, allowing all participants to compare and reflect on the outcomes. The completed posters are uploaded to the course online platform for further reference.

Potential topics & content	Quality criteria	Presentation formats
Economics, Professions	Engaging introduction	Powerpoint presentations
Gender, Feminism	Creativity	Images, Videos, Memes
Interview methods	Clarity of topic	Quizzes or live Polls
Content analysis	Narrative tension	Role play, Acting
Grounded theory	Storytelling	Poems
Ethnography	Audience engagement	Short Stories
Politics, War	Time Management	Audience participation
Social media, AI	Factual correctness	Caricatures, Cartoons
Classism	Spark curiosity	Debates
Education	Integration of literature	Statistics

Table 1: Examples of World Café results

Reflection round

At the end of the session, a brief round of rapid reflections is conducted in the plenary, during which students share the ideas they plan to pursue for their topic and presentation format. Additionally, students are encouraged to note any overlapping interests that could lead to potential joint presentations. This activity stimulates active reflection and exchange among participants.

	Time	Objectives & Content	Methods
Welcome	05 Min.	• Welcome & orientation • Introduction to the topic	• PPT on session outline • Activate prior knowledge
Background	10 Min.	• Role of science communication • Purpose and characteristics of Science Slam	• Students share their sources of scientific information • Short input on the topic • Plenary discussion: Challenges of science popularization
Learning objectives	10 Min.	• Define shared learning objectives for the Slam format • Foster self-motivation	• Pair-share on goals and skills • Input on session objectives
Use of AI	05 Min.	• Foster independent, authentic Science Slam contributions • Promote critical use of AI	• Clarify expectations for AI use in the Science Slam
Poor practice	10 Min.	• Critically evaluate a Science Slam • Generate initial ideas for one's own presentation	• Reading a 'poor practice' Science Slam as an example • Inverted problem solving on what was bad (and could be improved)
World Café	40 Min.	• Develop own ideas for Science Slam implementation • Cultivate a research-oriented and creative mindset	• Working on potential 1) topics, 2) quality criteria, and 3) presentation formats for the Slam in a World Café setting
Reflection round	10 Min.	• Develop a more concrete idea for one's own Science Slam • Plan next steps and potential collaboration with others	• brief reflection round: students share their ideas and identify peers with similar topics or approaches

Table 2: Overview workshop flow, objectives & methods

Follow-up Session

The follow-up session is scheduled 2–4 weeks after the initial workshop, allowing students time to reflect on their ideas. The session dedicated to the Science Slam lasts approximately 45 minutes. To begin, students complete a One-Minute Paper (Stead, 2005) responding to the prompts: “What is the current status of your Science Slam? Which challenges have you encountered? What questions or uncertainties are you currently facing?” Students then share and discuss their reflections with a partner, fostering exchange on interim results and open questions.

This is followed by a concise instructor input providing practical guidance on designing an effective Science Slam. Key aspects include typical structural elements (introduction – main body – conclusion), strategies for edutainment, stage presence, vocal delivery, media use, and the creation of engaging narratives. Subsequently, students collaborate in small groups (approx. 20 minutes) to develop initial concepts for their own Slam presentations, applying the principles introduced during the session.

The session concludes with a brief outlook on the upcoming presentation day, including prompts on giving and receiving feedback (Buckingham & Goodall, 2019) to prepare students for constructive peer evaluations during the Slam. In addition, students are provided with publicly accessible video

links illustrating 'good practice' examples. After this follow-up session, students are responsible for independently preparing their Science Slam.

Presentations

The session opens with a brief introduction highlighting the relevance of the Science Slam for qualitative research practice. The format embodies key principles of qualitative inquiry, including open engagement with a topic, development of a personal perspective, navigation of creative decision-making processes, and effective communication of research findings.

In the previous semester (summer 2025), nine presentations were delivered (some individually, others in pairs or groups of three) without commentary and in a self-selected order. Contributions spanned a wide range of approaches and topics, including a humorous cat video illustrating Goffman's concept of 'impression management', a staged scene on work-life balance, a perspective on female hackers, critical remarks on feminism, an analysis of digital disciplining in Foucaultian terms, insights into ADHD, and contemplations on happiness in relation to qualitative research. Many students chose qualitative studies and creatively conveyed both content and methodological context. Each student personally engaged with their presentation and explored a

topic that genuinely interested them. Everyone had something meaningful to say.

A subsequent plenary reflection session allowed students to discuss the Slams, share personal associations, and explore potential follow-up questions. As the students know beforehand, the slams are deliberately not graded for performance or technical perfection, rather, they are valued for their potential to stimulate discussion, encourage critical engagement, and highlight memorable elements that resonate with participants.

To deepen learning outcomes, the format can be supplemented with structured reflection questions, such as:

- How did the Science Slam contribute to a deeper engagement with your topic?
- Which elements of your presentation were particularly successful?
- What made other Science Slams compelling? What insights did you gain?

Such assignments support self-assessment and offer an opportunity to critically engage with peers' perspectives, all of which contribute to a richer and more durable learning experience.

Illustrative Examples of a Student's Science Slam

To illustrate the kind of outcome that can emerge from a Science Slam seminar, the following example presents a student's slam engaging with the book "The End of Love" from the sociologist Eva Illouz (2019), which incorporates insights from qualitative interviews.

Ghosting, Tinder, Heartbreak – Why Love is so Complicated Today

Today's topic is love. But from a scientific perspective!

I recently read a book that provided sociologically precise explanation of my subjective experiences – Eva Illouz: The End of Love. Eva Illouz is a sociologist, which means she doesn't analyse our feelings, but rather the conditions under which we feel. And she says: If love fails so often today, it's not our fault; It's capitalism's. Yes, really. Capitalism is to blame once again.

Back in the day – like in the 19th century – people got married because that's just how it was. Family, church, duty – everything was

clearly defined. And feelings? They were the cherry on top of the cake, but not a requirement.

Today: Anything is possible. We're free to love whoever we want. Sounds great, right? But Illouz says: This freedom is also a trap. Because romantic love has turned into a market. A dating market. And we're all part of it. With profile pictures, likes, and matching algorithms. And if everything is a market, what happens then? Right: We like, We compare, We optimize, We devalue.

Illouz conducted in-depth interviews with people whose relationships ended abruptly. And many report the same thing: The other person simply stopped responding; Ghosting. In the past, you would have had to say, "I don't want to see you anymore". Today, all it takes is: Don't text, Don't reply.

Why is that? Illouz says, because our approach to commitment has changed. Feelings are no longer obligations – they're options. And if I see better options, I just keep swiping. That sounds sad, but it makes sense. In a system where commitment is no

longer socially guaranteed but is negotiated privately.

Now here's the big one: Illouz says we all have a neoliberal soul. What does that mean? Quite simply, we think in terms of efficiency, utility, and self-optimization; even in love. We no longer ask ourselves, "Do you love me?", but rather, "Are you good for my personal growth?", or "Do you fit my lifestyle, my goals, my routine?". And if the answer is "sort of", then goodbye! Illouz calls this instrumental emotionality. Feelings become a means to an end. And when the purpose disappears, so do the feelings.

Now you might be asking yourselves "So what? What should I do now? Delete Tinder? Go back to arranged marriages?". Illouz isn't saying that everything was better in the past. But she wants to show us: If love fails so often today, it's not just because of us personally; it's because of a system that makes commitment difficult and separation easy.

The solution? Maybe socialism? Okay, maybe something a little smaller. In any case, awareness. If we understand that our love

lives are also shaped by politics, then perhaps we can be more mindful – of ourselves and of other.

So, the next time you get ghosted, remember: It's not (just) your fault. It's also capitalism's fault. It's emotional deregulation. It's a system that wants more matches instead of deep connections. But we're not powerless. We can live differently. Less like consumers, more like human beings.

Written by Arnjo Sittig

The Science Slam from a Student's Perspective

The following section is written from the perspective of a student who participated in the seminar and whose Science Slam was presented in the previous section.

I found it exciting to break away from the usual lecture format and explore other approaches. The preparation and collaborative work in the seminar were particularly helpful in this regard. Above all, examining different types of Science Slams was very helpful in giving me an overview of available possibilities. Collecting

evaluation criteria (that is, what makes a good Science Slam) helped us formulate a shared understanding of what our collective expectations were in the seminar, and it provided a solid framework for creating our own Science Slam.

At first, I didn't know what I could actually accomplish with the resources at my disposal, or what I actually wanted to do. In the end, I decided on a more lighthearted version of a presentation because I realized that's what suits me best. To reach that conclusion, however, it was essential to have a clear overview of all the different formats. While putting together the Science Slam, I noticed that I was hardly thinking about the content, but rather focused on the format and presentation style. In case of a traditional presentation, I always thought more about the content. Additionally, the 5-minute time limit was very challenging for me, since I was covering an entire book.

Evaluation and Reflection on the Teaching Method

For evaluation purposes, a Teaching Analysis Poll (TAP) was conducted by the higher education didactics expert at Chemnitz University of Technology to reflect on the use of the Science Slam format as a teaching method. The feedback session

took place at the end of the semester, following the student presentations.

Students particularly appreciated the freedom to choose their own topics, the flexibility of the presentation format, the explicit permission to use AI tools, and the opportunity to revisit topics from other seminars. The collaborative group work and the inclusion of the 'poor practice' Slam example were also seen as helpful elements.

Some challenges were also noted: condensing a complex topic into a short presentation, selecting a single focus, and navigating the wide scope for creativity required considerable effort. As in many courses, the overall workload of university studies was mentioned as a limiting factor. Nevertheless, the teaching concept was well received, and most of the students expressed a clear desire for more creative formats in higher education.

Transferability to Other Disciplines

The Science Slam format holds strong potential for transferability across disciplines. While presentation styles vary by discipline, the core aims – communicating complex content accessibly and linking personal interest with academic inquiry – remain relevant across fields.

A central challenge in university teaching, regardless of subject area, is the activation of students: enabling them not only to absorb knowledge but to engage proactively with course content. Encouraging students to explore their own interests fosters intrinsic motivation and helps counteract the tendency to fall into a passive, consumer-like role (Nordensvärd, 2010).

Creativity, in particular, is a valuable resource in higher education teaching (Kleinman, 2008). The Science Slam invites students to experiment with new formats of academic communication, which not only strengthens their presentation skills, but also cultivates a more playful, open, and self-directed approach to knowledge production.

The Science Slam format is highly adaptable, allowing adjustments in difficulty, length, format, and assessment. Its flexibility also supports inclusive participation, enabling students to engage through different modes such as writing, visual storytelling, or digital media, and to build on their individual strengths.

Conclusion

The Science Slam format can be a meaningful alternative to traditional assignments. It is a powerful pedagogical tool that enables students to actively

engage with academic content and reflect on their own scholarly perspectives.

By inviting students to merge scientific accuracy with performative elements, the format challenges them to reimagine how knowledge can be conveyed and received. While preparation requires effort and the balance between rigor and accessibility must be carefully maintained, the benefits clearly outweigh the challenges. Students gain confidence in science communication, develop transferable skills, and experience themselves not only as learners but as active contributors to academic discourse.

Beyond sociology, the Science Slam is a format with wide transferability across disciplines, offering diverse entry points for participation and fostering a culture of creativity and curiosity in higher education.

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