

What Do College Examinations Accomplish?

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Some of college's most anxiety producing events are examinations. Students sometimes wonder: what purpose is served by an examination? Students attend classes to receive information, to have questions answered, and to have assigned material interpreted, framed, prioritized, and shared with classmates; do exercises practicing what they learn [homework]; perform laboratory experiments to test the validity of and to gain practical experience in the theory of what they learn; write essays to demonstrate their organized original thoughts on specific portions of what is being learned; and give oral presentations that require clear, verbal articulation of what they have learned. With all these educational vehicles available to demonstrate learning, why are tests needed?

Not all examinations are equal. Different professors prefer to use varying examination formats such as true-false questions, multiple choice questions, matching questions, supplying definition items, short answer questions, fill-in-the-blank questions, and essay questions. Each question format is designed primarily to achieve a different measure of learning. Examination frequency, size, motives, styles, and proportional course grade weight varies from professor to professor. Among the recognized and established pedagogical ends achieved by examinations are: (1) measures of material **memory** or **recall** -- there are valid reasons why some material needs to be remembered; (2) Not all learned material needs to be at instant recall; some material is appropriately learned if it can be **recognized** when presented; (3) Some material is best defined as learned when it can be **contrasted/ compared** with other learned material; (4) Other learning can be measured by one's ability to see relationships between variables, called **synthesis**; (5) Still other learning is best demonstrated when students can take a vast body of material and wisely choose portions from various sub parts of knowledge to accomplish a given goal, called **integration**; (6) Another index of learning comes through an ability to handle nuances, subtleties, and delicate varieties called **differentiation**; (7) Of paramount importance in measuring learning is being able to competently use what is learned, called **application**; (8) Yet another vital determination of learning is rendering sound judgments about what is learned, called **evaluation**.¹

Recall, recognition, comparison/contrast, synthesis, integration, differentiation, application, and evaluation

can be measured, in part, through class attendance, homework, experiments, paper writing, and oral presentations; however, examinations offer experiences and evaluation features not commonly found in other educational vehicles that offer useful evidence of learning. These include: (1) in-class tests require students to work spontaneously; having to demonstrate evidence of learning without unlimited time to do so. Not all learning lends itself well to this evaluation mode; therefore, other learning vehicles [like take-home exams] seem more appropriate under some conditions; (2) Exams produce evidence of learning under the pressure of time. This is called "**performing**;" that is, having to produce output "on stage," not when it is comfortable or convenient. In some cases, this is a genuine reflection of life's requirements. One valuable quality of much of what we learn is practicability, the extent to which our learning is immediately or potentially useful. Other assessment vehicles may be more useful when time constraints are not needed or are deemed inappropriate; (3) Exams allow students to be compared to peers and to objective performance standards rather than being independently and individually judged. Criteria and normative assessment, too, is a real world reality that is best initially encountered in school. Individual centered, standard based, and comparative assessments all have their place and purpose; and (4) examinations allow professors to require student output that conforms to specified format, length, and style constraints, a real life matter in most vocations and professions.

A well constructed test is varied in form. A good teacher can and will, upon request, supply any examinee a clear, thought out, and rational explanation as to what is being measured by a test and test items and why this measure is useful. Any teacher who cannot do so is either lazy, incompetent, or arrogant. Tests are measures of teacher effort consequences; such assessments must be thought out in advance and articulated to anyone who questions or challenges such measures.

Examination stress has multiple origins: (1) a lack of student preparedness is an all too unfamiliar stressor; (2) a lack of examinee self-confidence is another stress producer; (3) unclear or unshared teacher purposes in testing produces added anxiety; and (4) exclusive or over emphasis on tests as learning measures produce unhealthy anxiety.

Testing is valid, has useful outcomes, and gives students measures of their achievements when exams are

prudently thought out, properly motivated, well constructed, clearly explained in terms of what is expected, and administered in conjunction with other well established learning vehicles.

Endnotes

¹ Bolded terms borrowed from Benjamin Bloom. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: David McKay.