

How to Make College Tests More Relevant, Valid, and Useful for Instructors and Students

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College testing is a vexing concern for many instructors because of the effort required in carefully constructing, administering, evaluating, and defending test results; over concerns about test validity; due to worries over possible plagiarism;¹ and concerns over the need to employ test results in a sensible, humane, and defensible (to students, parents, colleagues, and administrators) way. Tests also evoke stress and angst among students due to fears of failure, insecurity concerning appropriate study strategies needed to perform optimally, social comparison consequences, and physical and emotional exam stressors that strike most test takers.²

Assessments of student knowledge, skills, and progress in class take many forms³ including: paper and pencil tests using true/false, multiple-choice, matching, fill in the blank, short answer, and essay question items; oral tests including Socratic` class session quizzing and more formal in-class or in-faculty-office oral exams; take-home essay tests; student portfolios; student performances or presentations that are evaluated; graded group projects, and laboratory or field experiments. Such diversity of testing vehicles offers informed and versatile instructors many advantages and can be intimidating to timid or inexperienced faculty. Many instructors employ a limited repertoire of testing methods, relying instead on one or a few options. This is primarily due to the reality that the majority of college faculty have minimal formal education or training in teaching⁴ and testing strategies.⁵ In order for faculty to gain confidence in and adopt a willingness to expand their testing repertoire, they must learn some basic tenets of effective testing and

evaluating. Instructors need to inventory their own classroom communication skills and work to improve skills not fully developed. Skills such as: assertiveness, compassion, empathy, supportiveness, warmth, genuineness, non-defensiveness, flexibility, directness, personalness, specificity, and concreteness.⁶

For examinations assessing student progress/performance, care needs to be taken to make it honestly clear before the test what specific purposes are being served by each test. Students need to be reminded of and convinced that exam evaluation does not in any way reflect their worth as a person nor is a determinant of future academic success.⁷ Some tests are designed to measure memory of information or process; other tests are made to assess recognition; there are tests whose purpose is to show material integration, discrimination, synthesis, or differentiation; still other tests require takers to provide examples, evaluations, and stance taking.⁸ Each of these test types require students to prepare differently; therefore prior awareness of test purposes is essential for fairness, appropriate study strategies, and lowered stress.

Instructors need to explain in some detail **why** specific testing strategies are employed; what is hopefully being accomplished by both faculty and student; and how assessment will take place. When students are aware of what is expected of them and why those expectations are made, they tend to perform better and with greater spirit.

Faculty need to be careful to return assignment grades promptly. Delay in providing test feedback diminishes some of the value of the testing feedback process. Test evaluations need to be kept confidential between student and teacher. Grades are an instructor's criticism feedback. Criticism needs to be specific, honest, and constructive. Constructive criticism

is a judgment offered for the purposes of: (a) offering receivers objective external views of their performance to compare with self-oriented views of their work; (b) helping the receiver to recognize or interpret ways to improve past performances and/or ways to improve on future attempts; (c) demonstrating to receivers that their efforts merit judgment [as opposed to being ignored or distorted]; (4) showing genuine interest and appreciation for a receiver's effort; and (5) being encouraging, affirming, and supportive for the purpose of building another's confidence.⁹

One valuable test construction strategy is to prepare test questions in such a way that they prompt further learning by encouraging students and by stimulating new questions to be generated and thought about in the minds of test takers as a result of the test experience. Questions that refine, extend, and validate covered material give student and instructor evidence of useful learning and tend to enthuse the questioner and other classmates.¹⁰ Quality course related questions that are stimulated by well constructed test questions are a valuable form of student involvement and might well invite classmates to become more involved in class discussions.¹¹ Greater student involvement should be an aim of all educational experiences.¹² Student group involvement often aids motivated students to share and be reminded of essential course material.¹³ Group assignments and study offers practical discussions of course material;¹⁴ and well managed group work can elicit useful contributions from more reticent students.¹⁵

Another vitally helpful test construction strategy; and one that has a reputation of being difficult to achieve; is constructing test items that are clear, unambiguous, direct, and straightforward. Each test item ought have a specific goal in mind, eliciting some valued student thought or action process that can be shown to students to be a learning experience. Just as classroom teaching activities need to fit logically into an ongoing pedagogical plan, test items need to be a sensible, defensible piece in an exam mosaic.¹⁶

Instructor philosophy demonstrating that tests are not primarily designed or intended to expose what students do not know, but are, in fact, vehicles for allowing students to showcase what they do know. This goal requires a philosophical shift for many teachers;¹⁷ however, the results are commonly devastating when tests are seen as a gauntlet, a survival exercise, highly stressful, a miserable endurance circumstance, and are discouraging to many students. Tests that measure and highlight what students know are more humane, encouraging, less stressful, and encourage more preparation for the test.¹⁸

Another test preparation strategy that might prove useful in some classes is for instructors to formally assess students' test preparation strategies. Analogous to an essay outline, have students periodically prepare a concise written outline of major points they plan to focus on for test preparation. This may take the form of an outline, student-created mock test questions, or a short essay explicating test study foci. Such an exercise, done well prior to the test, can provide feedback concerning student test preparation and offer instructors opportunities to offer corrective and encouraging preparation guidance to students. Such a strategy may prevent students from getting hopelessly lost and discouraged to the point of giving up.

One more instructor strategy that has proven useful to my students was to prepare an examination similar in format, length, style, and material demands and place it on the library's closed reserve collection. Students especially appreciated the heads up on test type for courses' initial test. Such a model test helps reduce pre-test anxiety.

Making tests predictable, relevant to students, and covering likely internalized material and experiences, helps answer relevancy and validity concerns. Tests can be

constructed so as to take specific advantage of the nexus between classroom discussions, material presented in texts, and related assigned readings.¹⁹ When examination items ask students to relate material garnered from multiple sources over a period of time, their task is made more relevant and is more likely to be internalized than requiring the use of or the recall of content they might have only have been exposed to once.²⁰

An innovative assessment strategy that requires substantial instructor preparation, coordination, and monitoring but which, if done effectively, can offer stunningly useful results is to solicit select community civic, entrepreneur, and professional citizens to offer limited amounts of their time in helping to assess limited student writing, speaking, problem analysis, and coursework assignments. This real life assessment would offer practical, multi-disciplined feedback. Such an assessment strategy would amount to a mini-cooperative education experience. Such an approach would add the dimension of practicality and after-school relevance for students. The feedback they might get here could be vitally important to their future employment success and self image..

Testing needs to be seen by instructors and students as a learning experience focusing on what students know. Tests need to be clear in form and purpose, goal centered, assessed with learning in mind, be well connected to class discussions, text, outside readings, and class activities; and not come as a surprise to attentive students. High quality tests can typically be seen by outsiders (such as parents and community members) as pointing to learning that is practical, appropriate, and worthy of the time, effort, and money involved in the educational process. Exams that are highly esoteric or unfathomable to outsiders are difficult to defend to others.

Endnotes

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- ¹ See Ken Petress. (2003). Academic Dishonesty: A Plague on Our Profession. *Education*, 123 (3): 624-627.
- ² See Robert S. Feldman. (2003). *Power Learning: Strategies for Success in College and Life*, 2nd ed. McGraw Hill.
- ³ Feldman, 120-122, 130-133, 138-139.
- ⁴ See Tamara L. Burk. (2005). *Instructional Development and Classroom Communication*. University Press of America, pp. 14-16.
- ⁵ This assertion is based on 30 years teaching experience.
- ⁶ See Kathleen Koughl. (1997). *Communicating in the Classroom*. Waveland Press (esp. section 6).
- ⁷ Feldman, p. 118.
- ⁸ These various rest methods and functions are discussed in more detail in Ken Petress. (1998, September 11). The Purpose of Tests. *University Times*, pp. 3,7; University of Maine at Presque Isle, ME.; and Ken Petress. (2004). What Do College Examinations Accomplish? *College Student Journal*, 38 (4): 521-522.
- ⁹ See Ken Petress. (2000). Constructive Criticism: A Tool for Improvement. *College Student Journal*, 33 (3): 475-477.
- ¹⁰ See Ken Petress. (2005). Questions and Answers: The Substance of Knowledge and Relationships. *College Student Journal*, 39 (in press).
- ¹¹ See Jerome Rabow, Michelle A Charmess, Johanna Kippermann, and Susan Radcliffe-Vasile. William (1994). *Fawcett Hill's Learning Through Discussion*, 3rd ed. Waveland Press (esp. chapter 3).
- ¹² See Ken Petress. (2001). The Ethics of Classroom Silence. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 28 (2): 104-107.
- ¹³ Feldman, p. 126.
- ¹⁴ Rabow, et al., pp, 14-16.
- ¹⁵ See Ken Petress. (2004). The Benefits of Group Study. *Education*, 124 (4): 587-589.
- ¹⁶ See Dorothy M. Campbell, Beverly J. Melenzyer, Diane H. Nettles, and Richard M. Wyman, Jr. (2000). *Portfolio and Performance Assessment in Teacher Education* (esp. section four). Allyn & Bacon.
- ¹⁷ See Ken Petress. (2003). An Educational Philosophy Guides the Pedagogical Process. *College Student Journal*, 37 (1): 128-134.
- ¹⁸ See Robert W. Lissitz and William D. Schafer. (2002). *Assessment in Educational Reform: Both Means and Ends*. Allyn & Bacon.
- ¹⁹ See Ken Petress. (2003). The Nexus Between Assigned Class Readings, Analysis, Discussions, and Testing. *Reading Improvement*, 40 (2): 29-32.
- ²⁰ See Norman E. Gronlund. (2003). *Assessment of Student Achievement*, 7th ed. Allyn & Bacon.