Examinations

A Few Guidelines for Writing Better Examinations

When we give an exam, we ask ourselves some very intentional questions. Almost all of these questions involve the purpose of the exam. This may seem obvious, but it is not. What are the essential questions?

1. What information do I want students to be knowledgeable about?
2. How or in what manner do I want them to be knowledgeable? Do I want them to be able to describe, analyze, interpret, compare, or criticize? These are task functions and making them clear in our own mind is important; and making them clear in the students’ minds is equally important.

3. What manner of test is best suited for my goals and best suited in terms of the number of students in the class?
4. What do I expect my students to learn by taking the test and how will I communicate that to them?
   a. We expect them to know.
   b. We expect them to know in a certain way.
   c. We hope they will learn what knowledge is important by taking the exam and be able to diagnose their study habits and skills in the process. Thus, we must think about how to assist them in that process.
   d. We hope they will learn what it means to interpret, compare, analyze, or criticize. Thus, we must think about how to assist them in that process.
   e. Learning requires communicative feedback. How and/or in what manner will I communicate to them what they need to learn. This involves deciding how I will evaluate an exam; what I will say to the student, particularly in the case of an objective exam.

5. How will I assist students to become adept in the taking of examinations?
6. How many examinations will I give throughout the course of a semester, so as to accomplish these goals? How will they change throughout the course of the semester? And, yet again, do my students know what I am doing with the examination process and why?
7. How will the examinations I give assist me in evaluating what I have been teaching and what my students have been learning? Essay or Multiple Choice?

Advantages of Essay Exams

1. Allows us to evaluate a higher order of thinking skills, such as critical and analytical reasoning, where students must compose rather than select their responses to questions. But, of course, it only does this if we write an exam that does it.
2. Requires that students write, usually in complete sentences. Again, it does this if we grade accordingly.
3. Allows us to evaluate students’ ability to write.

Limitations of Essay Exams

1. Limited range of coverage. Multiple choice tests, say of 50 questions can cover more material than an essay examination in which 3-5 questions are asked.
2. More difficult to assess and more time consuming.
3. Less reliable in terms of consistency in grading and across graders. Compression effect for large classes.
4. Some experts argue that examination writing is bad writing; so, what we are doing is giving students practice in bad writing.

Advantages of Multiple Choice Exams

1. Can be used to test a variety of educational objectives, from application of principles to new situations, interpreting charts and graphs, solving problems to comprehension of basic principles and concepts.
2. Can cover a greater scope of information.
3. They may be more reliable in terms of testing, if they are well written, which is true of all of these advantages. Not affected by grader reliability.
4. More efficient in terms of scoring, reporting, and student assessment.
Limitations of Multiple Choice Exams

1. Do not test for production of new ideas, organize personal thoughts or display the thought processes of students. Of course, they do not ask for explanations (although a variation can do this). Analysis, critical thinking, and what we sometimes refer to as the higher thinking skills are difficult to test in this manner.
2. Do not evaluate writing skills.
3. More difficult to construct good ones, but with ability to test discrimination patterns, and with practice and thoughtfulness, we can construct good objective tests.

Combinations of Essay & Objective

1. Combine some form of short answer, multiple choice, and essay.
2. Be careful with negative and double negative questions.
3. Be careful with complex multiple choices.
5. Best answer alternative is a good choice.
6. Keep alternatives on multiple choice homogeneous and mutually exclusive, and consistent in grammar.
7. All of the above and none of the above allow for logical deduction outside substance of the question.
8. Can give multiple choice with explanations.
9. Essays with five alternatives, three choices, one question enforce broader range of study.
10. Take home reviews are good. Group study good.