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OPEN BOOK EXAMINATION: CHALLENGES AND WAYS TO DEAL WITH IT SUCCESSFULLY

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ABSTRACT

An "open book examination" is an assessment method designed in a way that allows students to refer to either class notes and summaries or a "memory aid", textbooks, or other approved material while answering questions. Open book examinations may be restricted resources type or unrestricted resources type. It can be given as the traditional sit down/ limited time examination or take-home open book exams. Open book exams have profound effects on student's learning strategies as well as teaching. Benefits of open book exams are significant and include ability of students to use higher order thinking. As open book exams are more challenging than traditional exams students need to prepare for them properly. Teachers need to modify methods of teaching as well as the types of questions used for evaluation. Though it is challenging for both teachers and students, it's very much useful if used properly.

Keywords : Open book examination, traditional closed book examination, assessment, teaching, learning strategies

INTRODUCTION

As the coronavirus pandemic spreads, many of the universities like Delhi University, Pondicherry University and Karnataka State Open University (KSOU) have opted for 'Open Book Exam'. Institutes across the world have used this method to conduct exams even before the Covid-era. Open book examinations were used frequently in law institutes before itself, but was used less frequently in other fields. But the Covid associated restrictions have made many universities to think in favour of open book examinations. It is generally accepted that open book examinations create an enriched environment, offering the student an opportunity to better understand and respond to a particular question.

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Open-book exams usually come in two forms:

- Traditional sit-down / limited-time exams, with varying degrees of access to resources and references.
- Take home open-book exams that are done at home. Question(s) are handed out, answers are attempted without help from others, and the exam is returned within a specified period of time (often the next day).

Another way of classifying the open book exams is based on the resources that can be accessed by the student during the exam. Based on this criterion, there are two types:

- a. **restricted type:** In the restricted type of open book examinations, students are permitted to bring into the examination room one or more specific documents approved by the course instructor. Students will be permitted only to consult printed documents such as the logarithmic tables, dictionaries etc, but no handwritten material or printed documents which are not priorly approved. An evaluator also makes sure that the printed documents that the students bring do not contain any scribbles on the margin. In this type of examination, the approved documents function more or less as appendices to the question paper.
- b. **the unrestricted type:** In the unrestricted type of open book examinations, students are free to bring whatever they like.

Benefits of open-book timed exam

An open-book timed exam may better reflect many natural situations, where professionals may have access to reference sources. Many studies have shown that students' long-term knowledge retention is improved from open-book exams, which also reduce anxiety. The focus of an open-book exam may shift to more application and analysis than testing of knowledge. The main premise for timed open-book exams is that lecturers can devise questions that require students to answer in more critical and analytical ways thus encourage high order thinking skills in their students. Studies have shown that students perceive five main benefits in open book examinations, namely practice in the creative use of course content, course content proficiency, increased opportunity for student self-evaluation and feedback, less examination stress and greater student regulation of content studied. Educators perceive open book examinations as providing the opportunity to promote thinking rather than memorising. Open book examinations relax the environment within which students learn, encourages student ownership of study, and increases self-evaluation with respect to the level of achievement of stated course outcomes.

Student's preparation for the open book examination

Students often have wrong ideas about these exams, such as: "I don't need to study much for my exam because the information will be right there for me to look up" or "During the exam I have to just copy the answers out of the text." As the instructor conducting the exam is aware that the candidates have access to what all resources, the type of responses needed from the student and the standard will be higher. So, the preparation for an open book examination is different from the traditional closed book examination.

- Find out from the instructor exactly what resources are allowed – and not allowed – to bring in to the exam.
- Learn the material as thoroughly as you would for any other exam.
- Find out the time available. Keep in mind that there won't be enough time to look up all answers.

- Organize the resources so that you can find the information you need efficiently, without wasting precious time:
 - Decide what you are going to bring in
 - Write key concepts on sticky notes and use these as tabs to index your textbook, notes, and other materials so you can find them quickly.
 - Prepare a condensed set of notes
 - Include page references
 - Include notes or concept maps
 - Have formulae written separately if they need to be applied.
- Take a test drive of the resources once everything is ready by practicing answering questions of the “apply”, “analyze”, “synthesize”, “compare/contrast” and “evaluate” type.
- Use tables of contents and index pages to locate relevant sections in the books you plan to use.
- Prepare a list of key information (formulae, key definitions etc.) likely to be used.
- Use index cards to list key topics and relevant page numbers of texts. Use one card per book
- Don’t anticipate questions and waste time writing model answers for these thinking you can copy the same.
- First answer the questions that you know without extensive referral to materials.
- Aim for concise, well-supported answers.
- Find out if whether citation of sources is needed for the answers.

- Remember that you need to know the basic answers and, if necessary, only look up an exact formula, a numerical value, or supporting evidence for your answers.

Designing a timed online open-book timed exam

When planning for an open book examination, it is necessary to maintain the connections between the established learning outcomes, the teaching and learning methods/activities, and the examination. A teacher needs to review the intended learning outcomes for the unit concerned, identify the aspects of learning measured by the exam and verify whether the teaching/learning activities that have taken place align with the examination or not. Both the teacher and the students who are going to be evaluated should have clear idea regarding the assessment criteria. The assessment criteria should clearly relate to the intended outcomes. Evaluators need to **set questions which require students to do things with the information available to them**, rather than merely summarising it and giving it back. To reduce the risk of students misinterpreting the questions, **make the questions clear and straightforward to understand. Explain to students the purpose** of using an open-book exam and explain what they will be required to do in advance and during the assessment. The teacher should guide the students regarding how to study for the open book exam and what all resources they will be permitted to use for the exams. Train the students in a model open book exam before the actual one. Compile a set of questions like case-based exam questions, other sources of information and share with the students.

Impact on Learning Strategies

Open book examinations have a tremendous impact on promoting the right mental sets in both learning and teaching. The most immediate result on students will be that they will stop "mugging" or rote learning. Most students used to conventional examinations think of "studying" as the

mechanical memorisation of information in textbooks and class-notes in order to reproduce it in examinations. Open book examinations will effect a fundamental change in this attitude. The concept of studying shifts from memorising to understanding concepts, and using these concepts to practise the skills of modifying and building knowledge, thinking critically, and solving problems. Education becomes a pleasurable activity as there is no need for memorising a lot of information.

Impact on Teaching Strategies

The effects of open book exams on teaching strategies will be equally profound. First, the nature of the examination questions will change. Questions will have to be designed carefully and intelligently to test the students' understanding, and the skills of applying that understanding. Teachers will have to design tasks that will provide exercises for the appropriate mental skills required in each subject. Instead of the teacher talking all the time and students taking down notes, classes will have discussions, questions, and other active processes. Open book examinations make the teachers to shift from the concept of teaching as transfer of information from the teacher to student to the training of the mind in certain intellectual skills and to design questions that can evaluate student's higher-level thinking. Thus, it can restore the true meaning of the word education for both teachers and students.

CONCLUSION

Open book assessments are valuable both as an assessment tool and a student-centred approach to education as well as a technique that reduces the level of anxiety experienced by participating students. Open book examinations result in more comprehensive student examination preparation, and hence more consistent learning throughout the course of study, with students avoiding "cramming". The perceived "worth" of an open book assessment is directly related to its ability to expose higher order "thinking" skills of candidates. Studies have suggested that open book assessments prompt students to exhibit their levels of skill in analysing, synthesising, and evaluating course materials and designated learning outcomes in a measurable and mainly standardised fashion.

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