

The Hidden Metamorphosis of Examination Papers : from Summative Caterpillar to Formative Butterfly

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Abstract

Terminal written examinations are in many ways ideal for summative assessment. They assess what students have learned by the end of the course, rather than while they are still assimilating, and are relatively straightforward to secure from plagiarism. But they are perceived as “high stakes/high risk” and, because marked papers are not returned, appear to provide no feedback. They seem to be assessment “of” rather than “for” learning.

However, students inevitably use old examination papers to revise. So after the examination is over, the secret formative life of the examination paper begins. How should we set examination papers (and mark schemes) so as to encourage a wholesome learning experience for subsequent student cohorts?

I argue that the need to prevent students from simply “preparing for last year’s questions” mandates a move away from a “sampling” approach to question setting, and toward more scenario-based questions – what a medical student would call vignettes – with very explicit layering.

Such vignettes actually provide an excellent context for learning the material in the first place, allowing old examination papers to be used as a vehicle for teaching. Students really like this, because it appears that we are “preparing them for the exam”, while formative feedback can be used to engage students with learning experiences that will “improve their answers”, rather than assigning a mark.

Examination papers designed with this ulterior purpose in mind can even be used to enable a constructivist educational approach, rather than merely to consolidate learning toward the end of the course.

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