



OPEN BOOK EXAMINATION: A TOOL FOR ASSESSMENT

Mrs. Vishavpreet Kaur

Asst. prof. B.C.M. College of Education, Ludhiana.

Abstract

Advanced countries are restructuring their educational systems and preparing to make changes in the human to intellectual capital for meeting the economic and manpower demands of the 21st century. Educationalist and academicians opined it is necessary to build a young community who are able to think independently and creatively and able to process the information analytically. Scholars opined that in order to develop creative and independent thinkers, more open-ended tasks that reflect real-life situations –questions involving problem-solving should be incorporated in 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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INTRODUCTION: In order to appreciate the merits of open book examinations, it is first of all necessary to understand the nature of teaching programs in general. Many people think of the central goal of school and university teaching as the "dissemination of knowledge". This approach to education treats the *information content* of a subject to be the most important. The teacher's role is viewed as facilitating the transfer of information from the textbook to the students' minds. What the student is expected to do is to understand this information, retain it, and retrieve it during the final examination.

Based on the above approach, most conventional examinations test how much information the students have been able to store in their minds. In order to cope with this demand, students memorize the information in class notes and textbooks, and transfer it to answer books during the examination. In this type of examination, success depends on the quantity of information memorized, and the efficiency with which it is reproduced.

CONCEPT OF OPEN BOOK EXAMINATION: An "open book examination" is one in which examinees are allowed to consult their class notes, textbooks, and other approved material while answering questions. This practice is not uncommon in law examinations, but in other subjects, it is mostly unheard of. Radical and puzzling though the idea may sound to those who are used to conventional examinations, it is ideally suited to teaching programs

that especially aim at developing the skills of critical and creative thinking.

Two Types of Open Book Examinations

One may think of two kinds of open book examinations, say the *restricted* type and the *unrestricted* 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. In the restricted open book examination, students may be permitted to consult printed documents such as the logarithmic tables, dictionaries, or complete works of Shakespeare, but no handwritten material or printed documents which have not had prior approval. One may also need to make sure that the printed documents that 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 itself*. These examinations are not radically different from closed book examinations. They do not present any special problems, irrespective of the nature of the course.

In the unrestricted type of open book examinations, students are free to bring whatever they like. They may bring any books (with or without scribbles on the margin), lecture handouts of the course instructor, or their own handwritten notes. The use of such examinations presupposes certain teaching strategies and types of questions.

Hoffman (1996) noted that closed book examinations require memorization but little original thought. They force students to memorize information rather than understand concepts and as a result, students walk away from the class learning very little. Such examinations do not prepare the student for practical, real-life situations. On the other hand, open book examinations can be used to differentiate those who truly understand the concepts from those who have merely crammed the night before. As early as 1969, Bacon had already pointed out that the use of open book examinations encourages students to focus on ideas and concepts as well as methods and development, while at the same time, reducing the amount of knowledge which only needs to be remembered for an examination and which will probably not be required thereafter.

More open book examinations will soon be introduced in schools and higher education institutions. The Ministry of Education has planned to initiate open book examinations in the Advanced Level General Certificate of Education Examinations next year, with Literature as the first subject with this format (The Straits Times, 22 March 1998). More open book examinations will also be implemented in the two universities (Han C, 1998). Twenty-one per cent of the courses at the National University of Singapore (NUS) already have open book examinations with one quarter of these courses in the Faculty of

Science alone (*Lian He Zao Bao*, 25 May 1998). No corresponding figures have been released by the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) as yet but several courses in the Engineering and Business Schools in NTU have had open book examinations for since 1997.

Impact on Learning Strategies

A more important reason for using open book examinations is that they 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 memorization 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. If textbooks can be consulted in the examination rooms, why bother to memorize them?

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. They cannot be of the form: "Write an essay on X", "Explain the term Y with examples", "Define the term Z", but will have to be designed carefully and intelligently to test the students' understanding, and the skills of applying that understanding.

If the nature of the examination questions changes, strategies for preparing students to take those examinations will also have to change. It will no longer be enough to paraphrase or simplify the content of the text books in the classroom. 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. In other words, teaching will no longer be the transfer of information from the teacher to student: it will be the training of the mind in certain intellectual skills.

Benefits

- Students are not required to engage in parroting of concepts, if they understand the concept they would answer correctly. This will remove tension of examination which has become integral part of normal education system.
- Those students who are intelligent but don't like to put in extra hard work in memorizing the concepts, facts and other data would enjoy this system.
- It is highly likely that more and more students would continue their education as the passing percentage would go up+. Less demanding on memory (regurgitation of

memorized materials) because it is no longer necessary for students to cram a lot of facts, figures and numbers for open-book examination

- Provides a chance for students to acquire the knowledge during the preparation process of gathering suitable learning materials rather than simply recalling or rewriting it
- Enhances information retrieval skills of students through finding the efficient ways to get the necessary information and data from books and various resources
- Enhances the comprehension and synthesizing skills of students because they need to reduce the content of books and other study materials into simple and handy notes for examination

Drawbacks:

- The students would stop studying and simply copy from the open book provided at the examination hall.
- It would be really tough to control the secret discussions between students who would cheat their way to success.
- The number of pass outs would increase and the students who pass out the exam of 12th board through open book would demand similar type of arrangement in higher studies and later on even in jobs they would demand the provision of open book.
- In an open book examination, it is meaningless to ask questions "Define the notion 'atom'", since all that the student has to do is copy the relevant information from the textbook directly into the answer book. In a closed book examination, the student first copies the information from the textbook to his memory, and then copies it into the answer book. This intermediate stage of memorization is what open book examinations attempt to eliminate.
- Difficult to ensure that all students are equally equipped regarding the books they bring into the exam with them, because the stocks of library books may be limited and also some books may be expensive to students
- More desk space is needed for students during the examination because students often need lots of desk space for their textbooks, notes and other reference materials
- Sometimes students may spend too much time on finding out which parts of the books to look for answers instead of applying the knowledge, practical skills and reasoning ability

- A lot of students are unfamiliar with open-book examinations. They must be provided with clear procedures and rules.

Simply imagine a surgeon who turns the pages of the book while performing surgery on his patients. Board examinations would lose their importance and no one would like to assess the ability and competence of an individual on the basis of marks or grade of the CBSE board.

CONCLUSIONS: The Open Book Examination is a new tool for assessment and it is the revolution in the field of evaluation against Closed Book Examination. Thus, open book examinations can restore the true meaning of the word education for both teachers and students. It is true that it will take some time and effort on the part of students and teachers to adapt themselves to the demands of open book examinations. But the changes will be inevitable. When combined with the mode of teaching that focusses on thinking skills, they will make education an exciting and enjoyable intellectual adventure, the beginning of a lifelong quest for knowledge.

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