Big Classes, Bigger Ambitions: A Participatory Approach to the Multiple-Choice Exam

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Abstract : Resources -financial, physical, and human- are increasingly constrained in higher education. University classes are getting bigger, and the concomitant grading burden on faculty is growing rapidly. Multiple-choice exams are seen by some as one solution to these changes. How much students retain, however, and what their testing experience is, continues to be debated. Are multiple-choice exams serving students well, or are they bearing the burden of these developments? Is there a way to address both the resource constraints and make these types of exams more meaningful? In short, how do we engender evaluation methods for large-scale classes that provide opportunities for heightened student learning and enrichment? The following article lays out a testing approach we have employed in four iterations of the same third-year law class. We base our comments in this paper on our initial observations as well as data gathered from an ethics-approved study looking at student experiences. This testing approach provides students with multiple opportunities for revision (thus increasing chances for long term retention), is both individually and collaboratively driven (thus reflecting the individual effort and group effort) and is automatically graded (thus draining limited institutional resources). We found that overall students appreciated the approach and found it more 'humane', that it notably reduced pre-exam and intra-exam stress levels, increased ease, and lowered nervousness.
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