Voting a question off the island; or, different ways to think about quizzes and exams

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Below are a few quiz and exam strategies that can be used as both learning opportunities for students and assessments of students’ performance.

1. **Collaborative exams.** I like collaborative exams, in general, because they can address both formative and summative assessment needs. Under this category, I have tried three different strategies –
   
a. I have students in small groups (typically 2-3 people) complete the exam. One exam is submitted between the three of them, with the responses a collaborative effort. I do this in class, as opposed to as a take-home, so I can monitor participation and contribution.

   b. I have students in small groups spend half the class time discussing the questions, and then use the remaining class time complete an individual exam. Although the responses are not collaboratively composed, each student’s responses are (hopefully) enhanced because of the preceding conversation with their peers.

   c. Finally, following a three-step process, each student submits two versions of the exam. Step 1: Each student completes the exam alone as a take-home, prior to the in-class exam session. Step 2: In class, students come together in groups of 2-3, discuss their answers to each question, and select the answer they want to formally submit as a group (or construct a new answer). Step 3: Students submit their original individual exams, and their collaborative exams (with each being worth a certain number of points towards overall exam grade).

2. **Student exam construction.** I have found that the questions students ask about a topic says a lot about their understanding of the topic. Therefore, I really like having students develop questions. So, for this strategy, I ask students to construct an exam, and provide a rationale for why it is an appropriate exam and why all of the questions are important to include. Sometimes this is the end of the assignment, and my assessment is strictly on the exam and rationale. Other times they are then given the exam to complete, and the assessment is based on both activities. It depends on my learning objectives. I have had students do this as individuals and in small groups. I prefer having them do it in small groups because I believe the exchange of ideas, priorities, and rationales is a valuable learning activity.

3. **Got-it-’til-you-get-it exam.** Especially with the support of technology (such as the quiz/exam tools within a learning management system like eCollege or Blackboard, or any number of data-collection web tools), it is easy to make an exam available to students for extended periods of time, and allow them to continue to work on their exam responses – receiving feedback throughout – until mastery is accomplished. What I like about this strategy is that it attends to both formative (via feedback on responses as they approach mastery) and summative (once mastery is accomplished) assessment needs.

4. **The People’s Choice exam.** When possible, I like to give students choices. It is hard for me to write a question that speaks to everyone in a class. Instead, I construct 2-3 questions for each topic or sub-topic, and ask student to select the one they wish to answer. Students report that they appreciate being able to choose the question.

5. **On-the-spot quiz construction.** For quick-and-dirty quizzes on a recent set of readings or activity, I will ask students (as individuals, pairs, or small groups) to write a question on an index card with their name(s) included, and throw the cards into a hat. Then I will pull three questions from the hat that everyone must answer. I like this strategy because I want students to enhancing their questioning skills, and like that they have some say in the questions that they respond to. I ask for names on the cards to make sure that students take the question writing seriously.
6. **Quiz-plus-one.** Another strategy I like is to pass out a quiz minus one question. I then ask students to construct the missing question and answer it. This gives students a chance to answer a question they'd really like to answer (one I may not have even thought of), personalizing each quiz. It also gives me a bank of questions I can then use in the future!

7. **Voting-a-question-off-the-island.** This strategy allows students to make a choice about which questions "count" and which do not. I have done this in one of two ways: students can choose not to answer one question (leaving it blank), or students answer all the questions but indicate which one they do not want counted in their grade. I prefer the latter tactic because it provides me with valuable information; it tells me which question(s) students struggle with, and the nature of the struggle because I have their attempted response available. Knowing this helps me make instructional decisions to make sure that students understand and appropriately apply the challenging content.

8. **Stump-the-professor, Phone-a-friend, Are-you-smarter-than-a-5th-grader?, and other game-like exams.** I like using games and game-like strategies throughout my courses. In terms of assessment, I like to use games such as –
   a. Stump the Professor. Stump the Professor is a strategy I've used in various contexts, and it works well for quizzes. I ask small groups of students to compose a question they think will stump me, write it on an index card (along with their names), and throw it into a hat. Then, I pull out each question, one at a time. For each question, students have a certain amount of time to respond in writing (either as individuals or in their original small groups) – depending on how many questions there are – as I work out my response. They submit their response, and then I share mine. Sometimes I am stumped, and I distribute points for that. This strategy helps them enhance their question construction, gives them some ownership over the questions, and is fun.
   b. Phone a Friend. For this strategy, small groups of students support each other as they each complete a quiz or exam. As a small group, they decide which question they need help with. They then construct no more than two questions they can ask me about the question (or, alternatively, I have allowed groups to ask me up to 5 yes-or-no questions). This strategy encourages students to consider what questions they can answer with each other's support, and which question they really want help with. They have to be very thoughtful as they construct the questions they ask me to make sure that after there "phone call" with me that they can proceed. It offers them additional opportunities for learning – not only from each other, but also from me.
   c. What's My Line? Similar to Stump the Professor, small groups of students construct a question they can answer but they think will stump the other groups. I collect the questions, share each of them – one at a time – and give student groups a certain amount of time to respond to each one. Students receive points for correct answers, and points for the number of other groups they stump with their question.
   d. Name That Answer! For this strategy, I develop 3-5 complex questions about the topic, and a set of corresponding hints. Small groups of students compete to see which groups can determine the answer to a question with the fewest number of hints.
   e. Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader? The idea behind this strategy is to have student groups compete on quickly answering questions. I use this strategy for quizzes when I do not need to consider the quality of the response, just if it is correct or not. If I am not using a student-response-system (e.g., Clickers), then I pass out different instruments (e.g., bell, whistle, drum) to small groups so that they can chime in when ready to respond.

9. **Quizzes about content of collaborative projects.** I use a variety of strategies to assess individual student contribution to collaborative projects, and this strategy is one I frequently use. Once I receive a collaborative project, I will construct a quiz about each project. Then, I will require each student to complete the quiz about her or his project. Students know about the quiz in advance (as part of the project description, as incentive to attend to the details of the project and participate fully), and well complements the other tools I use for group projects (e.g., team contracts, team member assessment tools, structured walk-throughs).