

Open Book Examination – Its Preparation, Types and Its Impact on Teaching Learning Strategies

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An "open book examination" is one in which examinees are allowed to consult their class notes, textbooks, and other approved material while answering questions. An "open book exam" is a test that allows you to bring the text or material you have been studying. This may sound at first that all you will need to do is look up the answer the day of the test--and thus a very easy type of test to take. However, this is not how this sort of test typically works. In fact, these are often quite difficult, as an open book exam requires a genuine understanding of the material and be able to interpret, think critically, and present an organized and well written answer. But with a bit of preparation, note taking skills, and test taking strategies, you can succeed your next open book exam. 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 programmes that especially aim at developing the skills of critical and creative thinking.

The main difference between open and closed book examination questions is the way that they use theory. An open book question provides the candidates with the theory the question is examining and then asks them to demonstrate their ability to apply the theory to a scenario. A closed book question will require the candidate to state the theory from memory. In this respect, the open book examination is closer to the working environment where the employee has access to manuals and examples of past work to draw on.

An open book question will rarely use the words 'describe' or 'state' or even 'explain' since these words usually preface a question which requires the candidate to recall a theoretical approach from memory.

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. Given the availability of textbooks in the examination room, teachers will not ask questions that require the mere transfer of information from the textbook to the examination book.

Preparing for an Open Book Test

There are several important things you should do to prepare for an open book test.

- Read the chapters ahead of time. Don't expect to find quick answers during the test.
- Know where to find everything. Observe headings and sub-headings and make your own outline. This reinforces the structure of the text in your mind.

- Mark all important terms with sticky notes and flags. If the teacher allows it, mark your texts with these removable tags wherever you notice important concepts and terms. Be sure to ask first!
- Review the lecture notes for themes. Your teacher's lectures usually provide an overview of the themes and concepts that appear on tests. You won't always get this by reviewing the book alone.
- Make your own notes if allowed, and write down important formulas or concepts that you've covered in class.

Test Taking

- **Read the questions carefully:** to understand what is expected.
- **Make good use of time**
Quickly review the number of questions and note how much time each could take. First answer the questions that you are confident of and/or for which you will not need much time checking out the resources.
Leave more complex and difficult questions for later
- **Don't over-answer**
Aim for concise, accurate, thoughtful answers that are based in evidence.

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 unrestricted type of open book examinations, students are free to bring whatever they like.

In the **restricted open book examination**, students may be permitted to consult printed documents such as the logarithmic tables, dictionaries 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.

As I said earlier, there are no restrictions on what the students can bring in an **unrestricted open book examination**. 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. In particular, it demands that the course focuses on a set of intellectual skills, rather than on the information content, and that no content based questions be asked in the examination.

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 memorisation of information in textbooks and classnotes 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 memorise them?

Does this mean that students don't need to "study" for examinations? No. It implies that studying should not be equated with memorising; instead, it should be understanding concepts, and using these concepts (along with available information) to practise the skills of modifying and building knowledge, thinking critically, and solving problems. In acquiring the right strategies of studying, nothing is as effective as the shocking realization that mugging is of no use in the examinations. Given open book examinations, there will be no more mugging. Once the burden of mugging is taken away, education can be a pleasurable activity, not a painful drudgery. What is learnt with pleasure is learnt more effectively, and retained better.

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.

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.