

Teaching Tip

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Teaching With Take Home Exams

Teaching Tips is written by Dan Madigan (The Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology). If you have a teaching tip to share or if you would like to comment on any of the teaching tips, please write to Dan Madigan at dmadiga@bgsu.edu

Last week, I wrote about how rubrics can be used as a tool for assessing student learning. This week I want to share with you an idea about another alternative form of assessment that is often used but underutilized as a creative tool. That is, the Take Home exam. Scott Rogers (Biology) wrote me an email that is worth sharing with the BGSU community. He points out that Take Home exams can be used very effectively as a teaching tool and they can be one of the most effective means of gauging whether students have effectively learned concepts. I quote directly from Scott's email:

"I use exams as a very important part of teaching and learning. The exams are always take home (usually, I give them 1 week to complete the exams), and are never multiple choice. This restricts their use somewhat, but I find that I can get students to solidify their understanding of the subjects much better with these types of exams. They do not simply regurgitate the answers from their notes, but they must understand the materials, seek other sources for information, and formulate new ideas about the materials based on what they have learned in the lectures and text. I think that students in my classes probably learn more during the exam than at any other time in the course."

In many ways, the take home exam serves a similar purpose to the writing of a standard academic paper in that the authors must carefully synthesize their thoughts and ideas on a particular subject and articulate that thought into the paper. In other ways, the Take Home exam resembles a big problem or series of problems that participants must solve using research, notes, lectures, etc. To be effective, Take Home exams should be treated like any other exam or activity that faculty develop for their classes. That is, the exams should be a meaningful activity that is directly linked to the desired learning goals of the ideas being examined.

For those of you who considering these types of exams, I leave you with some common myths that students have about Take Home exams, and some comments regarding those myths. (*Taken from the Learning Centre, The University of New South Wales*):

Open Book/Take Home exams are a breeze!

Open Book or Take Home exams are not an easy option. Answering the questions well requires more than just copying information straight from texts. For example, having access to a textbook can stop you from giving a wrong answer if you can't remember a fact or formula, but just getting that fact correct won't get you good marks. In Open Book exams, it's how you locate, apply and use the information that is important.

You don't have to study!

Probably the biggest misconception about Open Book or Take Home exams is that there is no need to study anything. You should study for Open Book exams just as you would for any other exam. Having books and notes to refer to might mean you don't have to memorise as much information, but you still need to be able to apply it effectively.

This means you must fully understand and be familiar with the content and materials of your course so you can find and use the appropriate information. In these types of exams, you need to quickly locate the information you need in the resources you have. If you don't study you won't be able to locate relevant information—you won't know where it is.

You can just copy straight from the book!

You can't copy chunks of text directly from textbooks or notes. This counts as plagiarism, just as it does in your other assignments. In Open Book exams, the resource materials are made available to you, so you are expected to do more than just reproduce them. You must be able to find, interpret and apply the information in your sources to the exam questions. You usually need to reference as well, just as you would for any other assignment.

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