EXAMS – A NECESSARY EVIL?

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Education is about teaching learners to think and solve problems using the tools available to them. They need to be educated in such a way that they could figure out their own problem-solving methods and not just be taught a specific method.

Examinations at university are a totally different experience from exams at school. At school, teachers train students for exams with sample questions and revision sheets. At university, that does not happen. Learners must take charge of their own learning. University exams generally aim to test how well learners understand their subject areas.

Tutors are more interested in the ways learners could apply the knowledge they have gained, rather than in how many facts they have learned. Therefore, learners need to be able to think analytically. In return, tutors must give credit to students who provide technically correct answers to exam questions, even if these are not the expected answers.

A proper system of assessment should be tied as closely as possible to the activities that learners would one day perform.

Tutors need to see themselves as co-learners. By providing handouts, emphasising key points and generating a list of possible questions, they could help to reduce exam misery and fears for learners.

The days of studying for an exam after the last tutorial are over. Learners need to draw up a revision timetable to allocate more time for difficult subjects. Having the Learning Management System (myLMS) is a bonus, and reviewing materials online to get a complete overview of the subject content is an added bonus.

How much time the learners need depends on how much work they have done so far and how much weighting is given to each question.

Review tools designed by tutors such as study checklists help learners to break their study patterns into organised, manageable chunks of information and can help them to tide over difficult times.

Summary notes and content mapping project hierarchies of ideas help learners to see the relationships between ideas. Tutors could create hierarchical outlines for each topic. Topics could be presented in a "tree-view" style hyperlinked with an easy-to-understand outline.

Do examinations measure what they are supposed to measure?

Reconstructing notes into charts, lists and diagrams will really help learners to be highly interactive. Revising means thinking analytically, that is, thinking around and about their topics and asking themselves questions.

Brainstorming over similarities, differences, problems, advantages and disadvantages help to strengthen their mental capabilities. Combined with confidence and self-discipline, these could help them to excel in their exams.

It might be good to allow learners to have access to marked exam scripts. This is being practised in other universities such as at the Department of Maths and Statistics at the Queen's University in Canada.

There, students could have supervised access to their marked exam papers and read the examiner's comments. Returning scripts to learners could make the exam system more transparent and examiners more accountable.

So, are exams a necessary evil? It may be evil to some but to others, it may be a boon. But whatever is the answer, there is always room for improvement. TCX