

Does seen examination promote “deep” or “surface” learning? Pedagogical reflections on using seen examinations for student learning feedback

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Keywords

“Seen Examinations”, Learning approaches, Student assessment

Abstract

As part of a four year module at the Ghana Technology University College, mid-semester examination was delivered by seen examination assessment method. The study explored Level 300 students’ experiences of “seen examination” and the value it may add to their learning experience. It offered a novel and new innovation way in assessing students learning approach away from the traditional sit-in time constraint test, which may be used to complement the student assessment mechanism at the university. The themes generated during analysis were: preparing for exams, fear of exams, focus and relevance of the assessment method

The paper focused on student perceptions and attitudes to “seen examination” using information gathered from in-depth interviews and interview guides. The overall impression from the students’ feedback in this study suggested that the assessment method of “seen examinations” is a valuable tool that enhanced their knowledge and skills, encouraged deeper learning, reduced anxiety, generated and motivated high impact engagement of academic activities in the area of learning especially during preparations towards sit-in time constrained examinations.

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1.0 The Introduction

For a very long time, the phrase “learning styles” has emerged as secondary to a larger pre-occupation with “approaches” to learning and many researchers working in various countries have found repeatedly fundamental patterns in studying and learning behaviors of students especially within the context of university education. The most influential finding of these researches was by Rhem (1995) which found out that many students did not get the point

of what they were reading “simply because they were not looking for it” (p.1). Students were looking for the facts they thought would be tested on.

Interestingly, whereas educators thought assessment to be a motivator of learning, students did not agree (Maclellan, 2001). This is a disturbing finding, since it means that for these academics, there was conservatism in thinking about learning in terms of passive and incremental rather than active and transformational conceptions of learning (Saljo, 1979). Again whereas teachers believed that assessment should be developmental and that feedback had a valuable role to play, students thought it was more about grading and had very little to do with improving their own learning (Marton *et al.*, 1993). Clearly, this presents challenges to not only between lecturers and students but also between what lecturers believed and what they actually did.

The effect on students sitting an examination is unpredictable (Shumway and Harden, 2003). For some students it is stressful and can result in an emotional and physiological state described by Timmins and Kaliszer (2002) as ‘exam stress’ which can interfere with academic performance. “Seen” exams help to spread the risk of failure and enables students learn from feedback. Therefore, one of the key reasons in introducing the “seen exams” in this research study was to reduce or eliminate students’ anxiety about sit-in time constrained exams and thereby lead to quality and high impact engagement preparations which in turn may lead to higher performance/pass rate. When questions are carefully crafted, the “seen exams” will encourage deeper learning (as opposed to surface learning), reduce rote approach (what is considered as “chew, pour, past and forget”) to learning. It will also serve as a motivation and boost students’ confidence during and after the exams especially when used timely and at appropriate level. There is the in-built mechanism of causative effect when used for mid-semester exams towards the end semester examinations of “sit-in”.

2.0 Literature Review

Typically and historically, many assessment systems have not allowed learners to improve their own learning because the assessments are considered to be an endpoint instead of a beginning or a step forward’ (Birenbaum *et al.*, 2005). Thus assessment is considered as summative (testing what has been learned) and therefore tends to drive the teaching (teaching for the test) or drive the learning (learning for the test). It appears therefore that in many ways, the traditional teaching in developing countries especially those in West Africa that had colonial ties with Great Britain, continue to use method of assessment that tend to push students toward the superficial levels of engagement with learning materials.

Surface approach to learning is where the intention is to reproduce as opposed to a deep approach to learning, where the aim is to understand through an active constructivist engagement with knowledge (Marton and Saljo, 1976). Students therefore readily adopt a surface or a deep approach depending on how they perceive the learning context, and most crucially how they perceive the assessment task (Ramsden, 1992). Such approach by students (and also by some teachers) defeats the purpose of assessment as being pedagogy that promotes student learning (QAA, 2006a). There is however, some overlap between these purposes which create potential points for conflict, particularly when the need for certification, standardization and measurement makes flexibility and changing assessment practice for pedagogical reasons slow and difficult.

It is now widely accepted that assessment tends to shape much of the learning that students do (Brown *et al.*, 1997), so if we want to change the way students learn and the content of what they learn, the most effective way is to change the way we assess them (Birenbaum *et al.*, 2005). Thus authentic assessment that focuses on the development, active construction of and

the integration of a variety of skills into a holistic project has an additional benefit of designing out opportunities for plagiarism. There is some evidence that lecturers who take a student focused approach to teaching and learning encourage students towards a deep approach to study (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Fry et.al, (2003) have provided the following to illustrate these concepts.

“The learning outcomes for, say, social science students, who adopt a deep approach to the task of reading a set text, would include full engagement with the central theme of the text and an understanding of contributing arguments. In contrast, those who adopt a surface approach would fail to identify the central themes – primarily because they would be engrossed in progressing through the text sequentially, attempting to remember the flat landscape of facts. (p.11)

The conceptions of deep and surface approaches to learning have increased in sophistication with further research. For example, Ramsden (1988) suggested that approach to learning was not implicit in the make-up of the student, but something between the student and the task and thus “was *both* personal and situational”. An approach to learning should, therefore, be seen not as a pure individual characteristic but rather as a response to the teaching environment in which the student is expected to learn and may even devise a strategic approach, (Biggs, 1987).

Helping students to achieve learning outcomes requires setting assessment tasks that support learning and which in turn depends on choosing an appropriate task or method of assessment. As this is not easy, most commonly used assessment tasks still tend to be the essay and/or the traditional timed unseen examination, whatever its format. But an assessment method must be part of the constructive alignment -an integrated system espoused by Rust et. al., (2007) in which the constructive aspect refers to the students constructing meaning through their learning activities and alignment refers to the activities that the teacher does in order to support the desired learning outcomes (Biggs, 1996). The main principle is that there is a *consistency* between the three related components of curriculum design; namely what you want your students to learn (i.e. what learning outcomes will they achieve?); what teaching methods you will use to enable them to achieve these learning outcomes; and finally, what assessment tasks and criteria you will use to show that students have achieved the learning outcomes you intended (and how you will arrive at an overall grade).

By the constructive alignment concept, knowledge transmission from teacher to student must not be passive but actively engaged students in the learning process and that assessment must not just be a measure of outcomes of the learning process” but an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning (Wojtczak, 2002, Watson et al., 2002). This means that an assessment must be supportive and formative in non-threatening contexts to help students through to the final stage of summative. It must be designed to improve achievement and retention and one of such method of assessment is “seen examination” which this research study seeks to explore and reflect on some of the findings with the view to improving student-teacher relationship and engagement.

The benefits of “seen” examinations is not only pedagogical but also physiological when viewed against the various criticisms made against “unseen” examinations, such as the comparatively short time allowed, and the appropriateness of examination questions in meeting all the learning outcomes set (Oxford Centre for Staff Learning Development, 2002).

Notwithstanding the several benefits of “seen exams” some education experts have expressed some shortcomings and have stressed that ‘seen’ exams do have some disadvantages. For example, ‘Seen’ exams can result in large numbers of students seeking information from a limited number of books, exerting pressure on library provision.

Plagiarism could be a possible problem as students with excellent recall may be able to use the words of others to answer questions. Such cheating would be difficult and time-consuming to detect, especially if papers are hand-written. Some experts believe that test anxiety is merely a students' self-perception or emotional reaction that accompanies the awareness of being inadequately prepared for the test (Musch and Broder, 1999) and that such fears will always be around and that a little anxiety is even good and desirable for examination.

What is "Seen" exam? It is a time constrained assessment task, presented to students at some time in advance of the assessment. The actual examination is still taken under strict conditions, with no external material allowed into the examination room and a time limit for completing the answers. This is in contrast to "Unseen" exam.

2.1 Research Method

This paper explored the lived experiences of students' expectations, perceptions and attitudes of "seen" exams. The students, numbering twenty (20) and made up of twelve (12) males and eight (8) females were offering management course in an undergraduate program at level 300, semester 2 module (15 credits) in a tertiary institution. The course being offered is a social science course in management that demanded a lot of reading. These students aged 25-32 were mature students who had opted for the weekend session of the same course of the regular (week-day morning) session which had an average student age of 20.

The module is usually assessed through individual sit-in examination in two components of mid-semester that constituted thirty percent (30%) and an end of semester-seventy percent (70%). The mid-semester assessment constitute a continuous assessment over which the lecturer has the full control to design any form of assessment (evaluation) that may or may not include a sit-in examination. However, the tradition in this university had largely been a sit-in examination at least as one of the routine way of mid-semester assessment. Therefore, implementing "seen exams" as the only means for assessing students for the continuous assessment component of this module was new and innovative to the students. As part of the preparation towards the introduction of this new assessment mechanism, it was necessary that the trial test fits in with the current teaching, learning and assessment strategy or objectives of the university and the faculty/department.

Ethical considerations and approval were sought and discussed with the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. As this approach was new to the students, there were several discussions held with students prior to the introduction in order to obtain their buy in, cooperation and full participation since the trial test could not have taken place if one had opted out. The students were therefore informed and the necessary information included in their module indicative descriptor form (course outline). Prior to that an informal contacts with some of them was made to gauge their likely acceptance and expectations in embracing the new concept of assessment. The questions were carefully crafted to ensure high level engagement and elicit quality response in terms of reading and research towards the examination. The reading materials for the various key lists of references were made available, both electronically and physically at the library.

Finally, an interview guide was used to elicit the student views, initial perceptions, experiences and attitudes to "seen exams". Students then received the questions two (2) weeks prior to actual exam date and the "seen exams" was finally taken as an individual time constrained test during the period for the University's mid semester assessment.

Two in-depth interviews were conducted and reviewed to ascertain the actual student experiences compared with the more traditional methods of assessment. The first interview was done immediately after the students had taken the "seen exam" during the mid-semester

examination period and the second one after taking the final end of semester examinations (sit-in exams).

3.0 Findings and Discussion

Inductive analysis (Hoepfl, 1997) was undertaken. Transcribed data was broken down into manageable units and placed into interrelated themes (Price, 2003). The interview guides and in-depth interview information are presented thematically according to the four (4) main themes;

- Preparations for examinations
- Fear of examination (FOE),
- Focus
- Relevance

3.1 Preparations for Examinations

Students' responses to how they prepared for both "seen" and the "unseen" examination showed clearly how the two types of examination assessment impact on student learning and approach. With respect to the preparations towards the two examinations, the students felt that the "seen" test enabled them to prepare adequately well and therefore considered it beneficial. For example:

"The preparation for the "ST" made me revised well and contributed towards my final "unseen" test at the end of the semester (SI 6)

"I am a slow learner, so preparing at my own pace made me learn and perform better". The advance preparation gave me the opportunity and time to learn deeply (SI 4).

"It made me learn a lot about the subject and the topic and was not afraid of the final "unseen" test " (SI 17).

3.2 Fear of Examination (FOE)

During the in-depth interview prior to the administration of the ST, the students expressed fear and lack of confidence in writing "unseen" test. These fears ranged from lack of adequate preparation to physiological breakdown and anxiety at the prospect of taking "unseen" test. Their fears were deep and were expressed in various ways by them:

"I always feel nervous and afraid that I may not be able to remember anything" (SI 8)

"My heart start beating rapidly, and sometimes get sudden stomach and headaches every time I am about to sit for "unseen" time constrained test" (SI 9)

"I feel I am not adequately prepared" (SI 8)

The sentiments expressed by the students were in line with and confirmed by Timmins and Kaliszer (2002); who found out in their work that students were always afraid in taking "sit-in" exams and described their physiological state as being under "exam stress". However the student state of exams phobia changed and were minimized after participating in the "seen" exams. In an in-depth interview with a focus group after the "seen" and "unseen" (end of semester exams) tests, they expressed confidence and positive feelings and expectations in taking the "unseen" sit-in time constrained test. This was clearly articulated in their responses when asked about their level of final confidence and expectations of the results:

"the prospect of sitting for the final exam after the "Seen test" did not make me nervous for the "Unseen" test at the end of the semester" (SI 19)

"the "seen" examination that I took bolstered my confidence in taking the end of semester "unseen" exams" and I feel I will do well" (SI 20).

3.3 Focus

In terms of deep learning and focus, the students indicated that the “seen” test encouraged and made them learn more during the preparation. These were expressed in various forms by the students:

“I feel, I had the quality time to learn a lot about my subject, structure and prioritize my reading. In fact I feel I really understand what I am doing” (SI 15).

“I didn’t have to cram all into memory but with the time at hand, I was able to appreciate the course and now I feel I know a lot more....” (SI 2)

“I believe one’s intelligent cannot be determined by “unseen” test alone, so “seen” test is good for me”. (SI 9)

These confirmed the findings and assertion by Brown et, al; (1997) and Birenbaum et al., (2005) who found that ‘Seen’ examinations were perceived as an assessment strategy which encouraged students to engage in fact-finding exercises, such as reading and looking for relevant literature to answer the questions. Students were therefore encouraged and motivated to adopt a deep approach in studying towards the exams.

3.4 Relevance

Students considered the “Seen Exams” as very relevant and appropriate in assessing their learning outcome especially considering the course that they were pursuing. They viewed the “seen exams” very beneficial and relevant and were willing to recommend it. While some will recommend the “seen exams” for mid-semester assessment only, others were of the view that the “seen exams” should be for end of semester exams only:

“The “Seen Exams” is relevant for my course and my future job” (SI 3)

“Seen exams” is good and should be used based on subject nature specific like my course” (SI 19)

There was also a recommendation that “Seen Exams” is used for both mid-semester and end-semester examinations even though there was the fear that “seen” exams could make one relaxed and un-ambitious and hence in such a situation the “seen exam” may not be appropriate and helpful and was aptly summed up as that:

“the “seen exams” was not helpful for me because it made me relaxed and would therefore not recommend it” (SI 2)

3.5 Conclusion

The overall impression from students’ feedback in this study suggested that the assessment method of “seen examinations” is a valuable tool that enhanced their knowledge and skills, encouraged deeper learning, reduced their anxiety and generated high impact engagement of their academic activities. This confirms similar works done by Race, Brown and Smith (2005) who found out that student who took “seen exams” experienced distinct benefits and hence the potential to improve student pass rate. The introduction of “seen exams” in the general assessment of students is no doubt one of the positive ways of diversifying assessment feedback and student learning.

It is recommended that “Seen” test must be introduced at the tertiary institution especially in courses that require a lot of reading such as in the humanities to improve students’ confidence and pass rate as well as provide them with the opportunity to engage in deeper learning and understanding of the subject matter for a life time job in the future. The introduction could be done on a gradual basis starting from the mid semester assessment (part of the continuous or interim assessment component of the module) or on a pilot basis across all

the relevant faculties and departments and later in some specific modules during the end of semester (term) examination.

In this way, the rationale and the basis of knowledge acquisition would be achieved to a very great extent as the whole idea of education is to ensure that what students learn “live” with them long after they had passed through the walls of the educational institution.

4.0 Research limitations and further research

The main ethical issues in a study like this are how to make the students comfortable enough to give objective answer, given the power difference between the researcher and the students. In other words, how does the researcher ensure that the students are not afraid to say “no” to participate without fear of any repercussions from the professor? That is the potential threat of students being influenced by the interviewer’s position as a lecturer is some of the limitations to consider when interpreting the results of this study. Further research with a wider student study population and across the other faculties should be undertaken especially in the area of aligning the methods of feedback to assessment, curriculum and student cohort.

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