



# Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

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*Responses to Charles Mitchell's September Forum on evaluation were meaty and thought provoking, although not numerous. The three faculty who put their thoughts on paper seem to share an important insight: test results may reveal something about teaching effectiveness as well as student achievement.*

*What do you suppose the low number of responses implies? Could it be a sign of sheepishness on the part of some who feel guilty about grading for personal convenience more than for precise evaluations? Naah, surely not. Perhaps widespread agreement just leaves little more to say. Is it possible?*

## Faculty Responses

Good thoughts . . . especially for total final grades in mathematics. However, for subjects with a <sup>m</sup><sub>i</sub><sup>u</sup><sub>t</sub> <sup>a</sup><sub>b</sub><sup>i</sup><sub>t</sub> <sup>y</sup>, the instructor should have many evaluative techniques at his/her disposal, ones other than quizzes or exams.

For example,

"hands on" projects comparing quality of work at the *beginning* of the course and at the *end* should be considered along with written papers, etc. on topics discussed within the course. That way the total pupil is involved, not just mastery of facts, although that is important also.

I have tried an idea on my exams that works well and students seem to appreciate.

For any multiple choice test question that more than 1/3 of the class miss, I add the number of points for those questions to each student's exam. This eliminates a "curve" and keeps me on my toes to produce well-worded test questions. Also, if I failed to teach a particular segment of the material well, that will be shown in pupil response to questions.

*Judith Mae King, Home Economics*

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The idea that we should weigh performance near the end of a learning process more than earlier performance makes good sense. Also, the need to teach to, then evaluate higher levels of thinking is important. I would add three other comments:

1. Charles' piece focused on exams, but it is important that we evaluate students in many different ways;

2. Too often, instructors take the results of exams to be absolute and fail to consider the multiple sources of error in their tests.

We fail to consider fatigue (tests that are too long);  
poorly written questions (e.g., ambiguous items);  
scoring error;

or

the confounding of skill deficits (e.g., writing ability) with content or process knowledge. A related problem is the failure to consider what test scores might indicate about inadequate instruction. When everyone scores at low levels on an exam, poor student preparation may be at fault, but so might be poor teaching or poor testing procedure.

3. Finally, I would caution against not letting the calculator do our thinking when it comes to a final grade. If evaluation has been carried out thoughtfully during a semester, adjustments for the concerns listed above have been made, and weighting has been planned appropriately, then we must be careful not to let feelings about an individual student guide the "creation" of final grades.

We need to recognize that at some point, any grading system has arbitrary features. If 90% is the decided-upon cutoff for an A, then giving an A to the person with an 89 means that the person with an 88 is just one point from an A.

If we make allowances in such circumstances, we must do so in a way that is fair to all students and not linked to special treatment.

*Bruce Henderson, Psychology*

As pointed out by Charles Mitchell, the designing of an effective evaluation system is, indeed, an integral part of the learning process. But it is, also, an integral part of the instructional process. That is, an effective evaluation system should not only assess students' progress and learning performance but also guide and improve instructional decisions as well. If progress is to be made in the development of higher order thinking, as Mitchell maintains it should, we must formulate new strategies to teach process not product. As it stands now, we are not sure how to do this. "Determining what a [student] understands" may be more a function of instructional strategies, not test or learning strategies.

*William Chovan, Psychology*