

EVALUATING THE PROCESS OF EVALUATION

C. Vijayan, Professor, Department of Physics, IIT Madras

It may be poetically incorrect to say ‘*November is the cruelest month*’ (though the poem reads well in the even semester!), but we all go through a hectic time, trying to wrap up the courses ensuring that we put our best into it, setting tough enough papers and then struggling to find the answers, putting together the grade sheet in time for the class committee meeting, pondering uneasily about the inevitable make-up exams and supplementary... Well, all that should be getting over by now; some breathing time before promising to ourselves that we will do a still better job the next semester.

Often a lingering worry might persist: ‘At the end of the day, have I been as perfect as I could have been, in awarding the proper grades?’ The whole process gets quite complicated, given the increasing number of students, variety in course styles and nature of tests/assignments in the era of the ever perplexing stream of new gadgets and paradigm shifts in the process of teaching–learning. Over the years, we all *discover* the best strategy of evaluation and keep modifying it dynamically as scenarios emerge.

The *coconut tree* technique

Assignments, surprise tests, open book exams and student presentations are modes of evaluation many of us try, apart from conventional tests. The fact is that a large number of students ignore any assignment till the last date and then hurriedly copy from the few *smart guys* around. Even if we permit them to submit e-copies, what we often get most often are *ee-copies* (local slang for *exact* copies). It is tough to judge this, particularly in large or medium classes. It is also difficult to give individual assignments. How do we then make sure that the effort and time spent on assignments is worth for both the teacher and the taught and that it serves the purpose intended?

We all arrive at or adapt our own best strategies for handling this through some thought and experimentation. One of the usual strategies is this: We declare upfront that all exams are going to depend heavily on the assignments and prove it abundantly in the very first exam (quiz or surprise test or whatever), sending a strong message for the students to take assignments seriously and to learn the content. In fact these assignments need not even be evaluated, it gets done indirectly! This saves time and effort, and here any mutual discussion and the *right kind of copying* becomes a welcome practice. It is all built-in now, the very purpose is of the assignment achieved without having to evaluate it and to worry about copying! There is this story of an old farmer who, in his death bed, calls his lazy sons and declares that he has hidden a treasure close to a coconut tree and then dies without specifying which tree. The sons dig out the land around all trees and find no treasure. But then, the effort leads to their getting exposed to farming methods and eventually they do find the treasure, year after year on the top of very tree. So you could declare in the first class that some treasure is buried under some of the assignment questions. Of course the real treasure is buried in the whole course, text, notes, web material, whatever. But then that information is taken for granted and hence is too vague to drive the students in a focused manner that this technique does.

A literally smart *back-up* technique

Many of us employ the method of *open book* exams which have several benefits over the usual kind. The tough question then is whether we allow notes, text, printed/xeroxed matter, laptops, anything and everything? Can we permit access to Wikipedia, text-book-solution sites, Moodle and social sites etc. during an open-book exam? A popular story begs itself to be included: a teacher declares an open book exam and one student keeps on bothering him, asking on whether *this-or-that* is permitted. The teacher gets fed up and gives a *pedagogically correct* answer: “You may bring anything you can carry!”. The student turns up for the exam carrying his elder brother on his back (an unimagined twist of the Newtonian theme of ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’).

A somewhat standard and popular method is this: Permit only a one-page (or both-sides-of-a-standard-sheet) handwritten material and nothing else for the *open book* exam. This reduces exam-related malpractices and more significantly, serves a very important purpose of the course: During their efforts to prepare the one *open page*, students are forced to go through the entire content, to make a judgment on the most crucial items and further, to write it all down. Several crucial learning objectives are met automatically by this single step. Also, the evaluation becomes even more meaningful.

There are several more and even better strategies that many may be using. It helps if we discuss these things on an appropriate common platform such as this and exchange views and adventure stories. That would enlarge our scope for evolving efficient methodologies in our common domains.