

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

Are Those Final Exams Necessary?

The semester is about to end, and multitudes of high school teachers (and some middle school teachers) are preparing to administer their semester final exams. As soon as possible afterward, they will enter the grades in the grade book. Now here is the question: Is giving those exams a “best practice” decision?

Keep in mind that the first question we should ask ourselves when thinking about an assessment is, “What is the *purpose* of this assessment?” If the main answer is, “To get a grade for the grade book or report card,” then we are definitely out of touch with “best practice.” Our purpose should be to determine if students have learned what we intended, and if they have not – to determine where the problem lies and how to go about correcting it. In many instances, this means we do not need to give final exams at all. If we have a strong curriculum, written in unit outcomes – and we have prepared and administered quality assessments for each of those outcomes – we may have all the information we need. However, teachers may say they want to see if students still know/can do what they demonstrated earlier in those assessments. The question then becomes, “Have they *retained* their learning?”

That second question is a valid one and may remain in the realm of “best practice” if the proper type of final exam is used. The problem with most finals is that they are nothing more than a list of questions about information from each chapter of the text covered so far. They are memorized items that students simply repeat on paper, with very little actual thinking required. Students scan their texts for underlined passages and formulas, or even worse – refresh their memories of trivial facts when teachers choose to spend several days of valuable class time for “review.” When we use instructional time for review, we don’t know if students retained the information or “relearned it” through the review process. Additionally, if higher-level thinking is not required by the assessment items, then the “learning” will disappear once again shortly after the final is over.

One or two questions that require students to pull together previous learning in a meaningful or thoughtful way satisfies the purpose of checking for retention. Here are a couple of examples.

History

Name three individuals and/or events that we discussed thoroughly in class this semester. What was the significance of each one in the historical period, and how has each impacted our world today?

Mathematics

We have completed five outcomes this semester. (Teacher lists them or points them out if displayed in the classroom.) Create a mathematics example appropriate to each outcome, and explain circumstances in which each can be applied.

Science

(Teacher provides a description of data appropriate to several [or all] of the unit themes in the outcomes completed during the semester.) Write a logical hypotheses for each set of data. Then list the steps of the scientific method you would use to test a hypothesis.

A commonly heard complaint in schools everywhere these days is that teachers don't have time to teach because they have to do too much testing. Don't compound the problem! It is not good practice to give final exams because "that's the way it has always been done." Abolish the "take it in/spit it out/forget it" syndrome. Either eliminate final exams—or assure that they are causing students to *think* about and *apply* their learning.