

## 10 Steps to More Humane Final Exams

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As this is the time of year when teachers and professors are writing final exams and students are studying for them (at least some of them), it is the opportune time to offer a few suggestions on how we can make final exams more humane. I am not convinced that most traditional final exams are a valuable part of education. In fact, the culture around final exams often distracts from the type of virtues that most of us want in our learning organizations. I'm especially critical of the traditional, time-based, and allegedly "objective" assessments that often take the form of multiple choice, true and false, and fill-in-the-blank questions. They do little to nurture an authentic culture of learning. **Nonetheless, I'll save that viewpoint, one that many in traditional education might consider more extreme, for another time.** Instead, this article assumes that people are working within the dominant and existing system of final exams. Given that context, here are ten simple but significant ways to create a more humane context and culture for students taking final exams.

### Test the Test

Is your test fair? Is it clear? How are you checking to see that the word choice and format of the text is not an unnecessary barrier for students? If the test is about finding out what students have learned, then it should not be a test-taking competition. Work WITH the students to devise a test that is fair, challenging, and has a good chance of measuring student knowledge and skill.

### Go Easy on the Drill Sergeant Approach

What good comes from scare tactics? Some think that being extra tough and scaring people into studying is the way to go. In general, this will simply add more anxiety, reducing student ability to concentrate and prepare to the best of his or her ability. Why not take a more encouraging and coaching demeanor? Try being a compassionate coach and cheerleader more than a drill sergeant when it comes to test preparation.

### Distinguish Between Rigor (Painful) and Rigor (Academic Challenge)

Rigor has multiple definitions. I'm all for creating challenging academic experiences, but there is no need to make it unnecessarily painful. If you go to the doctor to get a shot, they typically try to use the smallest needle necessary, and they have strategies to make it as quick and painless as possible. They don't sadistically jab you with the largest needle that they can find. Let's keep this in mind as we think about our test creation, how we prepare students, and how we deliver the tests.

### Be Clear About Your Expectations

What will it take to be successful? Why not be transparent about that? What good comes from making it a guessing game?

### **Reconsider the Notion that Memorizing the Textbook is the Goal**

I sometimes talk to teachers who like to throw obscure and “gotcha” questions on the exams to see if students read and nearly memorized the entire textbook. Is that really the goal of your class...textbook memorization? If not, go easy on this approach. The goal is not to trick or fail students but to measure what they have learned.

### **Check That You Are Assessing What You Said You Would Assess**

If you provided students with a list of course objectives or outcomes at the beginning of the class, does your test align with those? If not, that verges on a bait and switch tactic. Test them on what you said they needed to learn.

### **Offer Tips for Success and Invite Students to Share What Works for Them**

Why not offer some coaching and wisdom on what, based upon your experience, works best to prepare for the exam? You are not spoon-feeding students by being a coach and mentor. You are setting them up for success.

### **Find Ways to Celebrate Diverse Gifts and Forms of Growth Among Students**

Sometimes tests are biased toward certain aspects of a course, but they don't leave room for students to display other valuable learning from the course. Consider how you can design a test that gives all students a chance to demonstrate as much of their learning as possible.

### **Distinguish Between Worth and High Grades, as Well as Learning and High Grades**

A person's worth is not measured by final exam scores, so why not remind students of that? Also, I cringe when I hear people take an entire semester of rich learning and then reduce the whole thing to a score on a final. School is not primarily about getting passing or good grades, and when we make it about that, we are reducing the entire learning community to something far less relevant and meaningful. The goal is not to get a good grade. It is to learn what is important to learn, The exam is just a time to demonstrate what you learned. When we choose language that makes it all about getting good grades, we are cultivating a culture of earning over an authentic culture of learning, and that makes school ultimately less humane.

### **Make Student Success the Goal, Not Some Absurd Bell Curve**

I remember talking with a professor who was delighted to see the even distribution of As and Fs, seeing this as a sign that his course was designed and taught well. I suggested that this might actually be a cause for alarm. Why didn't more students reach high levels of mastery? Wouldn't we rather that everyone learn a great deal and demonstrate that? The curve has no place in most learning communities. Maybe there is justification for it if there is some sort of exam that is part of selecting a few people out of a larger group, but courses are usually supposed to be about setting up a context where as many students as possible can learn and thrive.

Our classes are not factories. They are communities of people, and these ten tips are a good way to emphasize that fact during this final exam season.