



No ticks please, we're British

I write to ask whether other readers share my memories of the various marking regimes.

I remember the terrible strain of marking GCSE scripts, when I had to write nothing but the marks at the end of each question and my initials at the bottom of each page. Not even a tick was permitted. I felt a bit like Dr Strangelove, trying to control a reflex action. I expect I was not the only one.

I have marked scripts of public examinations for 25 years. I distinctly remember saying to my team leader at my very first meeting that the need to annotate the scripts had not occurred to me.

He patiently pointed out the advantages of widespread ticks, wavy lines and comments throughout what are often long and complex answers in the subject of English Literature: you point out qualities in the script for your own benefit in a dialogue with yourself that is invaluable in reaching the final mark, and you also indicate to your supervisor the reasons for your choice.

I learned and operated this system and occasionally succumbed to temptation, making ironic comments beside howlers or other infelicities, and giving innocent enjoyment to a particular team leader who used to look forward to checking my scripts at grade review.

Then SATs – sorry, end-of-key-stage tests – arrived, and the landscape changed. Here were examinations that were truly public, in which the very mark schemes used by the examiners were automatically available to all teachers, and the scripts went back to schools. It was thus imperative that the system of script marking was uniform throughout the country.

The system chosen was very plain: just ticks at the end of each page of the Shakespeare answer, and the marks awarded. In the early years it was common to hear English teachers

complain that the scripts had not been very carefully marked because there were no comments or ticks on the body of the script. Then you would hear the counterargument that if ticks were allowed it would lead to teachers counting ticks and making other ill-advised comparisons between scripts, thus encouraging appeals against results.

Now photocopied GCSE and A-level scripts are routinely returned to schools bearing a variety of marking codes. The “year of no ticks” came and went for some but for others it became the new system. Some A-level scripts are now just underlined to show merit in the answer. Annotation at the end tends to echo key terms from the mark scheme so as to justify the band and the mark.

As a teacher I used to prefer my students' scripts to be returned with ticks and notes all over the place, because then I could see that the job had been done properly and also where marks had been gained and lost. But as an examiner I can see the dangers in imprecise or intemperate marginalia! At A-level I wonder how helpful annotation that simply mentions the AO number really is.

The advent of e-assessment should help to iron out inconsistencies. Opportunities for examiners to annotate will be constrained and harmonised. Communication between examiner and supervisor does not now have to be on the script itself, but can take the form of a kind of electronic Post-It Note. So will e-assessment put a final end to annotation of any kind?

Does anybody mind if ticks are out of the question?

Lionel Warner, Institute of Education University of Reading

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Head to head

David Walton

In defence of choice



It's time to take a more balanced view of what multiple choice questions can do, says David Walton

What is the best way to test a body of knowledge, understanding and skills? A: short answer. B: essay. C: coursework. D: multiple choice.

As a senior examiner, I have been setting and reviewing a wide range of multiple choice questions (MCQ) at A-level for over 25 years. Over this time I have almost ceased to become irritated by the ill-informed criticisms directed at this much-maligned assessment technique, usually by the press but sometimes from professional commentators who should know better. The criticisms (typified by derisory phrases such as “multiple guess”) are trotted out whenever a new testing model appears that includes such questions – press coverage of the changes to GCSE Science exams is merely the most recent example.

If only there was a clearer and more balanced understanding and acceptance of the role that MCQ can play, most often within a broader framework that employs other types of questions as well.

First of all, tests using MCQ can obtain, quickly and efficiently, substantial coverage of the content of a syllabus, particularly related to precise factual knowledge and understanding, but also application of these to specific situations. On a higher level they can also test a candidate's ability to evaluate information or argument, broadening the scope of an examination.

MC tests can be speedily and accurately marked by computer (critics often say this is why they are being used). But it means statistical information on performance can be readily collected and, based on this, questions can be graded to different levels of difficulty and discrimination. Pre-testing can and should always be used to establish that questions are suitable in themselves (clear and unambiguous) and for their intended audience (in terms of range and

demand), and formal trialling tends to happen less often with other question types. A well-constructed MC test is a reliable and objective way of distinguishing between the competence of different candidates.

The level of language used in the construction of items is obviously a crucial factor and must not be more demanding than the material being tested, but students with relatively poor writing skills may benefit from being able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in a way that does not depend on the former. Misreading MCQ stems or options may cost only a few marks; misreading an essay question, accompanied by poor writing skills, can cost an inordinate number of marks.

“Candidates may be able to guess the odd question correctly, but they can't guess their way to a pass.”

Admittedly, MCQs have limitations. One is their inevitable reliance on “passive” recognition of a correct answer. In MC tests where questions carry a single mark, a candidate may choose an incorrect answer for “justifiable” reasons and receive no credit for it.

Some skills cannot easily or satisfactorily be tested by MCQ. For example, questions involving synthesis or creativity may be expected to require a more open-ended assessment. In comparison, though, they have a more limited power to sample content, are more time-consuming to mark and have potentially less reliable outcomes.

It grieves me that every time MCQs are mentioned, they are painted by some as a sign of the lowering of standards or further “dumbing down”. They are most often perceived as “easy” because the mechanics of answering are easy, but whereas candidates can guess the odd answer, they won't guess their way to a pass.

About the author

David Walton has been an examiner in General Studies since 1973 and chair/chief examiner for the JMB/AQA since 1993

Nick Seaton

Shrinking in multiples



The rise of exams that put the answer in front of candidates should be curbed, argues Nick Seaton, or the country as a whole will suffer

Politicians have a problem. Having poured increasing amounts of taxpayers' money into state education, they must show some improvements. More to the point, the educational establishment and the exam system share the same problem: controlled as they are by politicians and with exam boards competing for business, they must also show results.

Add into the equation increasing numbers of exam subjects, increasing numbers of candidates, and difficulties with recruiting qualified markers, and the balance has shifted so as to overburden the system.

Multiple choice (MC) questions, which can be marked by computer, are an obvious solution to ease these difficulties, but will they genuinely benefit the system's consumers – the candidates and those who need to rely on their qualifications?

Employers and university admission tutors are already expressing serious doubts about the reliability of exam qualifications. They complain, with justification, that despite having employees or students with top-grade qualifications, expensive remedial lessons are too often required to teach knowledge and skills that should have been mastered earlier.

MC may indeed provide objective results, as its supporters claim, simply because the required answer has already been written in by those who designed the questions. MC may also measure basic competency, knowledge or skills. But it does not allow candidates themselves to demonstrate their knowledge of subtle variations or original thinking, which are surely an important feature of most education.

Also, when there is growing concern with inadequate standards of basic literacy and numeracy – the building blocks on which almost all knowledge is based – surely any qualification that fails

to take account of such key elements cannot possibly be fit for purpose. What use is the ability to choose answers to basic questions, without the ability to differentiate between different forms of language and, if necessary, explain things to other people in a way that can be understood?

Is it right, honest, or beneficial to allow someone to gain a qualification in any subject when their grasp of language is tenuous? What exactly are qualifications for? Do they exist for the benefit of the examiners or as a serious measure of ability, which may also be an essential stepping stone to the next higher level of study?

“Multiple choice exams make things too easy, discourage hard work, and encourage the lazy and the feckless.”

MC exam questions are another symptom of the dumbing-down of education. As well as making things too easy and discouraging the hard work and effort required properly to master a subject, they encourage laziness and those who are feckless.

There's a fundamental reason why policy makers, politicians and examiners should be wary of MC examinations. Unreliable qualifications will damage society and the economy.

It is reported, for example, that some GCSE maths papers require less than 20 per cent of available marks to pass. But in the real world would you employ an accountant who only got 1 in 5 of his or her calculations correct?

The education system, the economy and society in general must have an exam system that can be trusted accurately to reflect the knowledge and ability of those who use it. MC questions may have a place in the system. Expanding their use will damage us all.

About the author

Nick Seaton is chairman of the Campaign for Real Education and a school governor. He has written several pamphlets on education including *The True Cost of State Education* (Centre for Policy Studies, 2002)