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Resource: The Torch or the Firehose
Arthur Mattuck

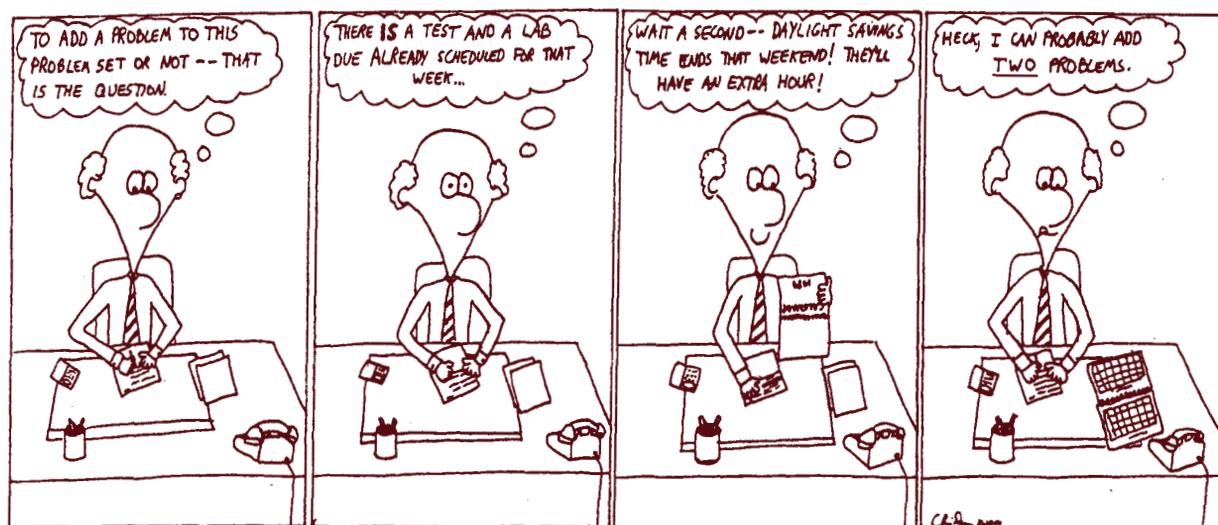
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Evaluating Your Students: Assignments, Exams, Grades

In a system where courses compete with each other for the student's time, those without regular assignments and clear expectations will lose out. Students get so far behind they can no longer even ask questions, let alone follow what is new.

Students tend to gauge their understanding by how well they can do the assignments, so these should be scheduled carefully. This is usually done centrally. Your job as recitation teacher will be to help your students with the homework, smoothing over some of the difficulties without robbing them of all exertion. If there's a weekly problem set, look it over as soon as it comes out and keep it in mind when planning what problems to work in class, but don't sabotage it by working essentially identical problems. (Baby chicks should not be helped out of the shell.)



Students tend to work in groups on homework; the course policy on this should be firmly stated and enforced. You should call in students who seem to be violating it, ask them to explain, and deduct credit as appropriate. Refer serious cases to the course administrator or lecturer.

Because students may work in groups, homework isn't usually counted too heavily in the final grade. It should certainly make a difference in borderline cases (there are often a lot of these), and in letting students who choke on exams still pass the course. Again, the lecturer should set this policy.

The most important thing about correcting the assignments is to do it promptly—which means handing them back at the next recitation. You're going to grade them sooner or later, after all; doing it sooner means that the students get the papers back while the work is still relatively fresh in their minds.

You can then discuss common difficulties in the recitation, and the material still will be current in the course. It's also important for morale—it gives students the feeling that you are interested in their work and take them seriously. They in turn will respond by putting effort into your recitation. For advice on grading, see “Grading Exams and Assignments” below.

Students take exams very seriously, which means that regardless of what you think of tests as teaching devices or as tools for evaluation, you have to take them seriously also.

Review sessions: At the last meeting of your class before an exam, your students will hope for a review. Giving a good review session means a little work in the preparation, but you'll be rewarded by the feeling that they are hanging onto your every word. You might at long last get some questions.

For a quiz review, usually the class hour is divided up: a brief outline of what the quiz will cover (very brief if it was done in lecture), comments and hints about those parts of the material which you feel are most likely to give them trouble, a question period, and finally working sample problems from old exams if there is time.

Exams tend to fall into routine patterns, and you or your students may be lucky and score a direct hit during the quiz review. They'll love you for it, but after the elation has worn off you may feel some qualms. Try for near misses instead. Remember that your overall purpose is to review a section of the course and help them see things in perspective, not just teach them how to pass the exam.

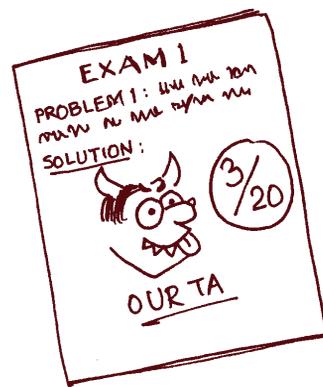
Grading exams and assignments: Exams are often graded by the entire course staff together, or at least the course head supplies detailed instructions. If not, you'll have to use your own judgment. If this is your first time as a section teacher, especially if you come from abroad, talk to some of the experienced section teachers to get a feeling for the standards—show them a few of your graded papers, or ask to see theirs.

Give partial credit, or plan on taking a different route to school each day. It's psychologically better to give positive credit only; indicate the mistakes, but don't put deductions -3, -5, next to each.

Look over some of the papers to see what the common mistakes are, and decide in advance how you will assign the partial credit. It is fairer to grade one problem at a time, shuffling the papers between problems.

Everything said about grading homework on time applies with even greater force to the quizzes.

Examinations



Give
Partial
Credit

One teacher advised never correcting assignments with a red pen: take it as a metaphor, saying that your comments and corrections should convey an underlying respect for your students' efforts. One TA corrected papers using a set of rubber stamps saying things like "NO!!", "RIDICULOUS," "CONTRADICTING YOURSELF," "UNREADABLE." That was using a red pen.

The T.A. attacks papers wielding her red pen like a flamethrower.

Handing back the papers: Your students will want to know at least the section averages and the overall average, and perhaps some idea of the spread (either through the standard deviation or a rough histogram of the section). They may want a letter grade too, but give them one only if it's course policy to. Some teachers give no information at all, hoping to downplay competition, but of course the students can find out other section averages, and it's silly to make them struggle for the information. Much depends on your manner and on course policy.

There should be solution sheets for students to compare against their own answers, so you don't have to write corrections on the papers as you grade them. Discuss common mistakes, as everyone can learn from others' mistakes, but keep it interactive. You might ask, for example, "What's wrong with this...?" It's also interesting to present unusual or elegant methods that appeared on some papers if you have time. (This goes for problem sets as well.)

After the first problem set we asked for answer sheets. The Professor replied, "Are you kidding? I don't have time to work through all these problems!"

The bad exam: It happens all the time. The exam was too long or too hard—your section average was 42, and your students sit there stunned. They've never gotten such low grades in their life.

Or the average was 65, but there was a trickily worded question that misled half your students, who feel they could have gotten 20 more points if it had been worded as it was in the homework.

The average was 92, and the students who have been walking on air all weekend because they felt they did so well have suddenly fallen to earth: "if everybody's somebody, then no one's anybody."

All you can do is reassure, offer sympathy, tell them it's not an uncommon occurrence. Even if you are as angry as they are, don't play union organizer: "This exam could have been better," not "They really goofed on this one."

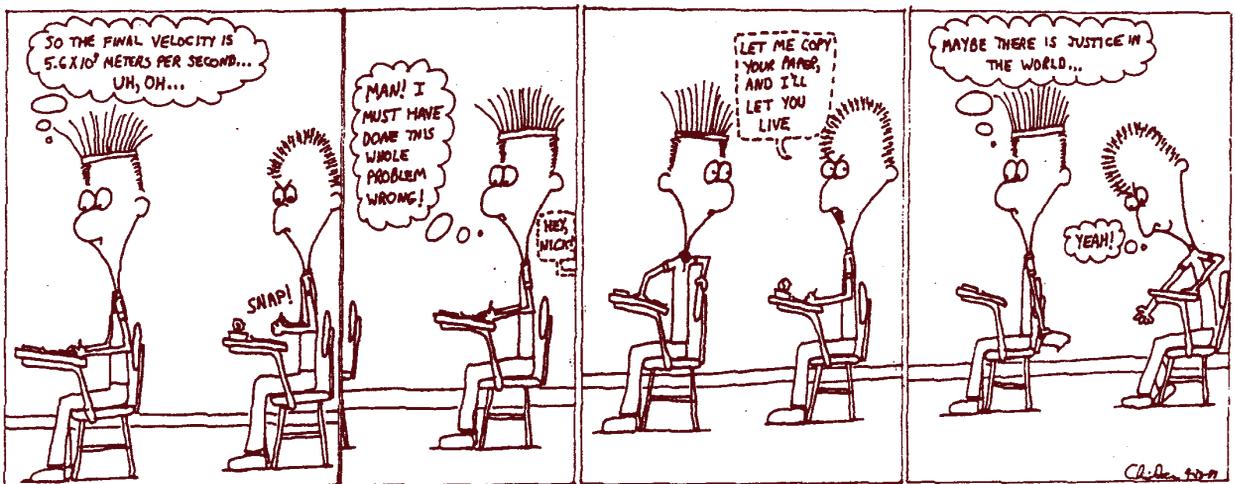
How does a bad exam happen? The lecturer or course head may be inexperienced at making up exams, he or she may not have had enough contact with the problem sets, or may have worked so long over the exam that it ended up seeming too easy.

For sure, it wasn't pre-tested. Ask that future exams be taken in advance by two recitation instructors, to judge the length and difficulty and spot poor questions. Volunteer yourself (you'll have to work out the exam later anyway). You should be able to write down the answer to an hour exam in ten to twenty minutes depending on the field.

Grade-changing requests: If you made a mistake, of course fix it, even if it's only a point or two. If it's just a judgment call, stick by what you did, but tell students that if their final grade turns out to be borderline, they can bring the paper back for reconsideration.

If students plead extenuating circumstances (headache, unusual stress...) make a note of it, and again, tell them you'll take it into consideration at grading time if they are borderline.

If you think the paper has been altered but don't have hard evidence, consult the course administrator or head. Where this is prevalent, some courses routinely copy all graded exams before returning them.



Final Grades. Lecture-recitation courses should have a uniform grading policy: how much each exam and the homework (and class quizzes and labs) will count. Student grades often are assigned in a meeting of all section instructors. You will usually have some leeway, however, and can take subjective considerations into account—giving a higher grade to the student who has steadily improved, for instance, even though the numerical total is the same as another who has steadily declined. Regularity and performance on assignments and section quizzes can be used to raise or lower grades near the boundaries.