

# Open Book Examinations in a Distance (Teacher) Education Programme: South African Teacher-Learners' Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

*The current post-apartheid system of education in South Africa requires students to be critical thinkers. Education institutions utilise a variety of assessment strategies; peer assessment, self-assessment, and group assessment are some of the formative assessments that are crucial in the promotion of students. This article reports on the findings of a qualitative study conducted at a South African higher education institution where the emphasis was on the open book examination as an alternative form of assessment. The research was conducted among 32 teacher-learners who were enrolled in a two year part-time (teacher education) distance programme. Five of the teacher-learners' facilitators were part of the sample. The majority of participants concurred that the open book examinations have a number of advantages. One advantage is that this model helps students in allaying anxiety usually associated with closed book examinations. However, there are few challenges posed by this form of assessment, as some current students simply reproduce extracts from the texts in their examination books without any critical interpretation. When properly applied, the open book examination presents an effective assessment model.*

*Keywords:* Assessment, Closed Book Examinations, Critical Thinking, Open Book Examinations, South Africa

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## INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM POSTULATION

The recent changes in South African education system have had a crucial impact on the assessment processes. Arguably, quality assurance in any programme, will be as valid and reliable as its assessment guidelines and procedures. Killen

(2003) posits that many of those who write about assessment of learning argue that validity and reliability are the most important when seeking 'good' assessment practices. Furthermore, he argues that people need to think of assessment as the process of determining how well students are able to demonstrate what they have learned, rather than trying to determine that which students have or not have learned (Killen, 2003). Whilst this article does not discuss the validity

DOI: 10.4018/jdet.2011070101

and reliability of assessment, it is crucial to think of the vital importance of these concepts within the context of outcomes-based education and its assessment in South Africa. The enhancement of critical thinking skills is supposed to be the ultimate goal of education. Outcomes-based learning and assessment is more about students attaining skills, applying what they have learnt during the process of learning.

In the past decades, teachers assessed their students mainly through the end of the year closed book examinations; multiple choice items on standardised tests played an important role in many instances. The closed book examinations are still widely used today, and there are many effective educators who use them well. However, Kuhs, Johnson, Agruso, and Monrad (2001, p. 1) point out that “flash back thirty years ago, one would see teachers assessing student learning utilising end of the chapter exercises, worksheets, tests and the occasional project”. Again, some of these forms of assessment have pervaded until the present. Kuhs et al. (2001) also contend that in today’s classrooms, students keep journals, make presentations, work in groups, assemble portfolios of their work and have constant individual conversations with their teachers to demonstrate what they know and are able to do. Whilst the multiple choice items on standardised tests are still used, the shift currently, is towards the use of more open-ended assessment. The employees in all aspects of work need to be able to use their critical analysis when looking at and solving problems. When the post-apartheid system of education was formulated, it was based on the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and among its critical outcomes; the system envisages students who are able to:

- Identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking;
  - Collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information;
  - Demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem solving contexts do not exist in isolation (DoE, 2002, p. 1)
- From these outcomes it is clear that the present education policy in South Africa seeks to introduce and sustain an education system which focuses on relevance and skills to equip students for the future. Assessment strategies used in classroom should be congruent to the outcomes based style of teaching and learning.
- Nuttall (1973, p. 1) describes four main functions of examinations. These functions are the following:
1. They are used for the purposes of diagnosis;
  2. They are used for curriculum evaluation;
  3. They are used for predicting future success;
  4. They are used for assessing attainment.
- More recently, Mothata, Van Niekerk, and Mays (2003) cite Mays who captures what many speakers in a 2000 conference highlighted as important qualities of effective and relevant assessment practices. Among these were that assessment should be:
- Outcomes-oriented: assessment should measure the significant learning that students should actually be able to demonstrate;
  - Validity: the assessment procedures should assess what they are designed to assess;
  - Comprehensiveness: assessment should cover the content, contexts and outcomes adequately;
  - Authenticity: assessment should require demonstration of learning in congruent real-life contexts.
- All the above aims support the assertion that assessment of students is fundamental to learning. Much of student learning is assessment

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