

from (Wilbert) McKeachie's Teaching Tips (pp. 81-84).

HELPING STUDENTS BECOME TEST-WISE

Particularly in the case of multiple-choice examinations, I have found that a good morale builder is spending 15 minutes or so the day before the first test telling students how to take a test of this sort.

Some of the points that I make in such a lecture follow.

Taking Multiple-Choice Tests

The student taking a multiple-choice examination is essentially in the same position as a poker player. The object is to get into a position where you are betting on a sure thing. If this is impossible, at least make your bet on the choice where the odds are in your favor. In poker, you are obviously in the strongest position if you know exactly what the opponent has; and in the examination situation, you are also in the strongest position if you know the material. There is no substitute for study. At the same time, it is unlikely that you will be absolutely certain of all the right answers. In these cases certain techniques may help.

What I recommend (to the student) is this: go through the examination a first time and answer all of the items you know. In addition to getting a certain amount of the examination done without wasting too much time on single, difficult items, it is frequently true that going through the complete

test once in this way will suggest the answers to questions that might have been difficult had they been answered in serial order. When you have gone through the test once in this fashion, go through it again and answer any questions that are now obvious. There will still usually remain a few questions that have been left unanswered. It is in connection with these that certain tricks may be useful.

If the item is multiple choice, don't simply guess at this stage of the game. See whether or not it is possible to eliminate some of the choices as incorrect. In a four-choice multiple-choice item, the probability of getting the answer right by pure guesswork is one in four; if you can eliminate two of them, your chances are 50-50. So take advantage of the mathematics of the situation.

Once the examination has been answered completely, it is a good idea to go through the whole thing again to check your choices on the various items to make sure that they are the ones you still regard as correct and to make sure that you have made no clerical errors in recording them. In this connection, it is worthwhile to point out the common misconception that, when you change your answers, you usually change from right answers to wrong ones. As a matter of fact, Mueller and Wasser (1977) reviewed 18 studies demonstrating that most students gain more than they lose on changed answers.

ADMINISTERING THE TEST

Handing out a test should be a simple matter. Usually it is, but in large classes, simple administrative matters can become disasters. It is hard to imagine how angry and upset students can become while waiting only ten minutes for the proctors to finish distributing the test forms. And if this doesn't move you, imagine your feelings when you find that you don't have enough tests for all of the students. (It has happened to me twice—deserving a place among my worst moments in teaching!)

How can you avoid such problems?

1. If you are having tests duplicated, ask for at least 10 percent extra—more if the test is administered in several rooms. (Some proctor always walks off with too many.) This gives you insurance against miscounting and against omitted or blank pages on some copies.
2. Unless there is some compelling reason to distribute the tests later, have your proctors pass out the tests as students come into the room. This protects students from mounting waves of panic while they wait for the tests to be distributed.
3. Minimize interruptions. Tell students before the exam that you will write announcements, instructions, or corrections on the blackboard. Some exam periods are less a measure of achievement than a test of the students' ability to work despite the instructor's interruptions.