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Test Review Sessions: A Better Design

By: [Maryellen Weimer, PhD](#) in [Effective Teaching Strategies](#)

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Terence Favero begins where many teachers are with respect to review sessions. Students request them. Teachers don't like to give up class time to essentially go over material they've already covered. It's difficult to find a time that works for everyone—students don't want to come in early, and professors don't want to review at bedtime. Then there's the issue of who shows up for the review session. Usually, it's not the students who most need to be there. And finally, there's how review sessions are generally structured. Students ask questions, which the professor answers, while the students take notes. Favero notes, "Rarely does this approach lead to deep learning or prepare students for an exam." (p. 247) Favero decided to redesign his review sessions. He decided to have them during a regularly scheduled class session. On the syllabus he lists them as a "review" or "test preparation" and has nearly perfect attendance that day in class. "Like many teachers, I came to the conclusion that if I wanted my students to become problem solvers, I had to provide them with low-stakes opportunities and time to solve them." (p. 248)

Next, he changed the focus of the session from a rehash of content to solving problems. "Because of the vast amount of information in textbooks and other electronic media, most students today have a difficult time discerning the essential content of the discipline and how it might be used to solve problems." (p. 247) To help students develop better problem-solving skills, Favero has used two different active learning strategies. The first he calls an "open-ended strategy." Students start by writing down the five most important facts, theories, or concepts from that section of the course. They partner and compare lists. Favero then tallies and lists the topics on an overhead transparency. He adds topics students may have missed and then arranges the list in order of their importance, discussing with students why these are the topics they should be reviewing for the exam. Next, students, working in groups, generate two or three multiple-choice questions for topics on the list. These are presented and answered collectively in class. "Students regularly question each other on confusing language or selection of the answers, again revealing what student know (or don't) and how they know it. Time permitting, we rewrite the questions so they could be exam worthy." (pp. 247-248)

Favero also uses a second strategy he describes as "closed-ended." He brings to class eight to 10 questions taken from previous exams. "I typically avoid knowledge or comprehension questions and focus on application-, analysis-, and synthesis-type questions." (p. 248) All the questions involve problems, and Favero works hard to get students to outline key concepts and pieces of the problem first. "I try to get

students to hold off selecting the answer. Too often, I find that student learning short-circuits when they attempt to identify the answer without first identifying how to solve the problem.” (p. 248)

He always includes a “tricky,” as in difficult, question in this group—not to frighten students, but to talk them through how challenging problems can be approached. “Explaining challenging questions before an exam gives students a better chance of learning how to problem solve before they are in the middle of a stressful exam.” (p. 248) This strategy also does an excellent job of removing hidden agendas. There are few surprises on the exam itself. Students are correctly anticipating the kind of problems they will be asked to solve.

Students don't always embrace these review structures when they first experience them. They are used to asking questions and getting answers. These sessions require them to work! This process also effectively reveals to students whether or not they are prepared for the exam. Favero notes that even though the sessions initially cause students frustration, in the end they do reduce pretest anxiety. Finally he notes, with some surprise, that these review activities have revealed strengths and weaknesses in his teaching. Sometimes he thinks material presented on a particular topic has been well explained and is understood by students. The review sessions reveal that students either didn't understand it at all or are holding misconceptions. “The review sessions help me identify content areas that need attention, something that end-of-the-semester evaluations do not.” (p. 248)

Reference: Favero, T. G. (2011). Active review sessions can advance student learning. *Advances in Physiology Education*, 35 (3), 247-248.

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