

2016

Answering Student Questions During Examinations: A Descriptive Study of Faculty Beliefs

Susan B. Stillwell

Lorretta Krautscheid

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/sn_fac

 Part of the [Nursing Commons](#)

Research Brief

Answering Student Questions During Examinations: A Descriptive Study of Faculty Beliefs

Susan B. Stillwell and Lorretta C. Krautscheid

Abstract

Examinations are used to evaluate individual student learning. Therefore, fair and consistent administration practices are essential. One issue associated with testing administration practices includes whether or not students should be allowed to ask questions during exams and how faculty should respond. Findings from this descriptive study indicate that faculty believe answering questions disrupts the testing environment, inhibits effective monitoring of the testing environment, and could provide unfair hints to students who ask questions. Yet, faculty permit students to ask questions to clarify unclear wording, to provide definitions, and to appear receptive to student needs. Recommendations for nursing education and research are provided.

KEY WORDS Nursing Education – Exam Administration – Student Assessment – Testing Practices – Exam Policies

Outcomes of examinations have serious implications for students. Thus, implementing evidence-based testing administration practices is critical. Conversations with faculty peers revealed a variety of beliefs and practices, including whether or not students may ask questions while taking an exam; some faculty answer questions on a case-by-case basis and others do not permit students to ask questions. A review of the literature offered little empirical evidence on testing administration practices and, specifically, no evidence on how to respond to students who ask questions during an exam. This study describes nurse educator beliefs about answering individual student questions while administering an examination.

According to Twigg (2012), examinations are used to measure learning outcomes and provide faculty with information to make grading decisions. Exam scores may also be used to compare aggregate student performance against standardized norm-referenced exams to evaluate curricular effectiveness (Waugh & Gronlund, 2013). In some cases, exams are used to determine the effectiveness of teaching strategies (Bain, 2004). Because examination outcomes have serious implications for both students and the program of study, it is essential to enforce testing administration practices that produce valid assessments of individual student knowledge.

An exhaustive literature review was conducted using ERIC, CINAHL, EBSCOhost, MEDLINEplus, GoogleScholar, Communication

Source, Education Source, and PsycINFO for the following key words: *test, administration, student questions, asking questions, testing practices, disruption, assessment, proctor, nurse, education, belief, perception, and exam policies*. Despite this exhaustive review, no empirical research was located to guide best practices for administering an exam and the question of whether faculty should respond to individual student questions during an exam.

On the other hand, expert opinions about testing administration practices were found in the literature. For example, Twigg (2012) stated that “to reduce student anxiety, the faculty should . . . avoid unnecessary conversation before or during the test.” Twigg further noted that “faculty should avoid giving unintentional hints to individual students who ask for clarification of questions during the test” (p. 477).

Zimmerman, Sudweeks, Shelley, and Wood (1990) cautioned that faculty should not “provide unfair help to individual students who ask questions during the exam. Only provide information relating to the administration of the exam, not to the content of the test items” (p. 8). More recently, Waugh and Gronlund (2013) stated that “the administration of a carefully prepared achievement test is largely a matter of providing proper working conditions, keeping interruptions to a minimum, and arranging enough space between students to prevent cheating” (p. 84).

Common to these sources is the suggestion that faculty should incorporate testing administration strategies that reduce anxiety and minimize interruptions. Further, faculty should avoid giving hints when providing clarification to students who ask questions.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. Institutional review board approval was obtained from the authors' academic institution. Consent was implied when participants completed and submitted the SurveyMonkey™ survey.

About the Authors Susan B. Stillwell, DNP, RN, CNE, FAAN, ANEF, is associate dean for graduate programs and associate professor, and Lorretta C. Krautscheid, PhD, RN, is assistant professor and master's program director, University of Portland School of Nursing, Portland, Oregon. For more information, contact Dr. Stillwell at stillwel@up.edu.
Copyright © 2016 National League for Nursing

doi: 10.5480/14-1351

Participants were identified from publicly available school of nursing web pages. Nurse faculty email addresses ($N = 548$) were obtained from 27 Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education accredited nursing schools representing 20 of the 50 states in the United States. Ninety-two individuals responded to the online survey (16.7 percent); 27 did not meet the inclusion criteria screening question: "Please indicate if you currently teach a didactic course in an undergraduate nursing program that requires quizzes, tests or examinations." A researcher-developed survey, informed by recommendations from the literature and anecdotal faculty comments, was created. The survey underwent critical review by a panel of six didactic nurse educators from the researchers' university. Two revision recommendations were incorporated, and content validity was assured following a second critical review by the same panel.

The instrument consisted of two general questions about testing administration policies, nine Likert-scale questions measuring faculty beliefs about nursing students asking questions during examinations, and five narrative response questions. Likert-scale questions were scored on a seven-point scale; scores ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and included reverse-order questions to limit response bias. The survey instrument was found to be highly reliable ($\alpha = .87$).

RESULTS

A final sample of 65 nurse educators (11.8 percent) completed the survey. Participants were primarily white (89.2 percent) females (86.2 percent), ranging from 33 to 76 years old ($M = 55$, $SD = 8.81$). Most worked full-time (89.2 percent) in public universities (50.8 percent) and were primarily master's prepared (41.5 percent). Their teaching experiences varied from one to 40 years ($M = 16$ years, $SD = 10.98$). Most participants ($n = 57$, 87.7 percent) reported that their schools of nursing did not have a policy regarding the answering of students' questions during an examination.

Overall feelings about allowing students to ask questions during exams were found to be generally negative (55.2 percent), generally positive (39.7 percent), and neutral (5.2 percent). These calculations were generated by computing the mean of a respondent's ratings across the survey items and comparing this mean to the original seven-point scale of agreement.

Participants also reported a wide array of personal perspectives about answering questions during an exam, including not answering any questions, answering questions only to clarify the content or meaning of words in an exam item, instructing students to write their questions on the exam, asking students to raise their hands to ask a question, and instructing students to walk to the front of the room and ask their question quietly. The 20 percent of participants who reported having a personal course policy about asking questions during an exam described a variety of strategies for communicating the policy (e.g., communication before exams or during course orientation, in the student handbook, or in the syllabus).

In response to the question "Why do you think some faculty members allow students to ask questions during a quiz, test or examination?" a number of reasons were provided. The most prevalent were to: a) clarify the definitions of words, b) answer unclear questions, c) provide definitions of English words to English language learners, d) appear responsive to student needs, and e) be perceived as being nice or helpful. Some suggested that insecurity about the quality of exam items was a possible reason for allowing students to ask questions.

Two common topics emerged from the narrative text data among faculty who reported they did not answer questions during exams. First, participants reported that answering questions for some students creates an "unfair" testing environment. One participant observed: "Letting students ask questions during an exam introduces too many uncontrollable variables." Another participant wrote: "It is difficult to answer questions without giving unfair hints."

Second, these participants tried to maintain a testing environment free of noise and distractions. Participants wrote that answering questions during exams is disruptive to others. They also wrote about their inability to effectively monitor the testing environment when they are distracted by a student who is asking a question: "Because of the disruption, it does not support the student's ability to master exam taking and it takes away from the ability to proctor an exam."

The quantitative findings support the finding that the ability to effectively monitor the test environment is disrupted when students ask questions during an examination ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.67$) and can provide students with hints ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.41$). Nevertheless, although participants tended to not favor the practice of permitting students to ask questions during exams, allowing students to ask questions was identified as a common practice ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.38$).

Other findings that emerged concerned attitudes about the fairness of answering an individual student's question ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.80$) and about whether answering a student's question provides the student with an unfair advantage ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.73$). The questions receiving the highest level of agreement were the following: exams evaluate a student's ability to independently select the best answer ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 1.46$), and tests provide a reliable method to evaluate student learning ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.24$).

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from this study present the differing beliefs nurse educators have about answering student questions during exams. The variation in faculty beliefs may be due to the lack of empirical evidence about test administration practices, thus contributing to an educational environment based on tradition, personal preferences, and trial and error. Without evidence to guide educational practice, it appears likely that these divergent views will continue.

Two important limitations to this study include a low response rate and self-report; thus, causal inferences cannot be made. A number of factors could have affected our response rate. Faculty receive multiple emails, including other requests to participate in research, and may lack both the time and motivation to respond to research requests. In fact, some respondents asked us to remove their email addresses from our list. Faculty who did not perceive the salience of the topic may have chosen not to respond. Offering incentives to complete the survey could have increased the response rate but we chose not to offer incentives.

Based on the findings from this study, we recommend that nurse educators, individually and collectively, reflect on testing administration practices and then collaborate on the implementation of agency-specific testing administration guidelines. These guidelines should be communicated via course syllabi, appropriate handbooks (student and faculty), and in the classroom to ensure consistent application across the curriculum.

It is our recommendation also that the guidelines explicitly state that individual student questions will not be answered during an

examination. However, we recommend that students have an opportunity to write comments about exam questions on a question query form attached as the last page of the examination booklet. Students' comments should be reviewed by faculty for common themes, insight into student thinking, and information to consider during test-item analysis.

An additional recommendation is to establish a peer review panel of colleagues who will review exams for content, formatting, syntax, and spelling. It is important also to conduct readability analyses to avoid colloquialisms, idioms, and cultural phrases that may be unfamiliar to English language learners (McDonald, 2014).

The study described in this article reports on faculty beliefs about students' asking questions during examinations. It is important also to know how students feel about this question; thus, a follow-up research study should be conducted to explore student beliefs. In addition, questions remain. One participant in the current study wrote that "faculty know how to answer questions appropriately and fairly," while others reported struggling when answering questions. A qualitative study should be conducted to explore these opposing beliefs.

This study highlights the divergent testing administration practices of nurse educators and the variables nurse educators should consider when establishing testing administration policies. It provides a basis for the examination of current practices and a rationale for developing standardized testing administration practices applicable for specific educational environments.

REFERENCES

- Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McDonald, M. E. (2014). *The nurse educator's guide to assessing learning outcomes*. Burlington, MA: Jones and Bartlett.
- Twigg, P. (2012). Developing and using classroom tests. In D. Billings & J. Halstead (Eds.), *Teaching in nursing: A guide for faculty* (pp. 464–484). St. Louis, MO: Elsevier.
- Waugh, C. K., & Gronlund, N. E. (2013). *Assessment of student achievement*. New York, NY: Pearson.
- Zimmerman, B., Sudweeks, R., Shelley, M., & Wood, B. (1990). *How to prepare better tests: Guidelines for university faculty*. Brigham Young University. Retrieved from <https://testing.byu.edu/handbooks/bettertests.pdf>