



**Opinion**

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# Changing Times



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## Abstract

Over the years, university teaching has seen major changes, trying to adapt to new technologies and world events. In this short paper, we explore how our teaching philosophy and course delivery have been affected by recent technological developments. This paper looks at those major adjustments through the lens of an analytics course offered in a graduate program at a Canadian university.

**Keywords:** Education; Philosophy; Changing Times; Pedagogy; New Technologies

## Opinion

The world of education has seen many changes over the years. Many grey hair people might remember using a sliding rule to perform arithmetic calculations. We even had to learn how to approximate the squared root of a number manually. Eventually came the era of calculators who could do simple calculations. Many professors forbidden their use during exams, believing that students will learn better without that tool. However, it did not stop companies from increasing the performance of calculators, even making them programmable. Yet again, although calculators became allowed during exams, only non-programmable ones were permitted. It seemed that our education system is always a few years behind the available technology.

As a University Statistics professor, I saw the evolution of the technology and how it was difficult for universities to adapt to those changes. Final exams were always taken in a similar environment, without textbook and notes and only a non-programmable calculator allowed. On some occasions, in specific courses, a crib sheet was allowed where students could write all relevant formula on a one-sided page. Of course, if a person can write very small and is actually able to read their notes, it became an advantage over other students with a poor vision. Sometimes professors will provide the necessary formulas for the examination. Is this the best pedagogy for teaching and learning? How often, when those students graduate, will their employers expect them not to look at their notes and keep in their pockets, that list of formulas that they might need. The answer is obviously never. It seems that memorization of academic material became the number one skill required to be successful and obtain a good GPA.

A few years ago, in a graduate course, I started to experiment with open-book, open-notes exams. No more need to memorize anything but understanding the concepts became the most important aspect of learning. That was only the first step, because at that time, even if students have access to all the learning material, they could only use their calculator. It meant that in an Analytics course, we used to provide students with incomplete printouts of results and expect them to complete the blanks to answer questions. Of course, it is certainly a step in the right direction. One more time, we can ask ourselves, when will our students only have access to incomplete printouts in their work environments?

In a quantitative course, many skills can only be developed with practice. Actually, one needs to run the analysis using the proper software program, to generate results. The use of Excel, for example, became essential. This cannot be accomplished only by looking at results generated by someone else. Therefore, I modified the way of taking Analytics exams by allowing not only, notes and textbooks, but also the use of students' own laptop to run the analysis to answer questions in midterm and final examinations. Of course, this approach is not without challenges and could increase the possibility of cheating. I have decided to use an honor system with students, trusting that they will not communicate with each other during the exam period.

In a survey conducted with students at the end of each semester, I found that some students are nervous about taking open-book and open-notes exams. They are concerned that the

exam might be more difficult. However, the average results in exams with or without material available were not very different. If everything is open and it is possible to use a personal computer, why request students to write their exam in class, instead of allowing them to do it in the comfort of their home.

During the winter 2020, in February, the coronavirus pandemic took everybody by surprise and as a precaution, the government requested that university campuses be closed completely for almost two years. It was no longer possible to teach in classrooms. Within a week, all professors, with or without experience with online teaching, had to transform their courses and offered them virtually, mainly using Zoom. Immediately, many new challenges surfaced, like the lack of good internet connections or a quiet place to follow courses, the feeling of isolation, the lack of motivation and human contact, and many more difficulties. Many students had just started their first semester oversea, far from their family and they found themselves really alone. An online survey conducted at the end of this transitioning semester, showed that one of the most important variables that had helped them during that period, was the professor's accessibility and support. I realised that we cannot underestimate the impact, good or bad, we can have on students' life and success.

Since February 2020 and until September 2022, all courses were offered virtually. I continued to teach the same Graduate Analytics course. I taught on Zoom, recorded my lectures and making them available to students afterward. Midterm and final examinations continued to be taken with open-book and open-notes, computers allowed, but obviously no longer taken in the classroom. Students wrote their exams from wherever they were and submitted their completed exam papers into one PDF

file on Moodle, the platform that supports the course. The only difference between the pre-pandemic and pandemic exam taking approach, was that my students did not write their exam in the controlled environment of a classroom. They also ran complete analysis instead of filling in the blanks. Unfortunately, I could observe some similarities between student' approaches in some of the exam questions. For that reason, some professors decided to run proctored exams, where a proctoring software monitors the student' computer's, webcam video and audio. I have selected not to take that road and still believe in the honor system.

Eventually university campuses re-opened, and we were back to teach in class in September 2022. It was a mistake to think that it would be business as usual. Many learning tools that I introduced during the pandemic were maintained, such as online quizzes at the end of each chapter to help students not to fall behind and stay motivated. Office hours on Zoom and review sessions on Zoom continued to be offered to maintain the new acquired flexibility. I revert back to midterm and final exams with open-book and open-notes using computer but taken in a classroom.

However, a new challenge for instructors was uncovered as students' absenteeism is on the rise. More students miss classes without valid reasons and expect to successfully complete the course. Some professors find themselves teaching with 50% of students missing. We have not yet discovered the reasons behind that phenomenon that was not as acute prior to the pandemic. Perhaps some of the lectures recorded during the pandemic made their way into a cloud and used to compensate the lack of class attendance. The world of Academia is full of challenges, but it remains the best profession in the world.



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