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Sharing Ideas for Formulating Easy to Write Exam Questions with a Focus on Statistical Practice

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I see final exams as a necessary evil and a poor assessment tool, and their preparation as a daunting, time consuming task, but to my students the final exam is of prime importance. They invest hours in solving exam questions from previous years, so I treat the exam questions as a very important teaching tool, despite a personal preference for projects, case studies and exercises using simulators. Ironically, many instructors who are proponents of active learning have observed that the level of student collaboration reached in the preparation of solutions to old exams is seldom reached in project work, where tasks are typically divvied up like pie.

In order for the diligent solution of the exam questions from previous years to help our students learn to be good statisticians, some exam questions must go beyond straightforward testing of knowledge of the topics.

In this talk I will share ideas I have developed to meet this challenge, addressing issues including: how to write questions that can be recycled; where to find ideas for applied questions; how to identify underlying principles and translate them into exam questions; how to come up with creative ways to incorporate statistical software (here JMP) in an exam solved without computers; how to deal with language challenges. The examples are from courses in introductory statistics, industrial statistics and DOE.

I hope that my ideas will help you to formulate your own exam questions, and anticipate hearing your ideas.

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