

Creativity in examination question writing: How novel can examination questions really be?

Conference abstract

Filio Constantinou

AEA-Europe conference, 9-12 November 2022

Author contact details:

Filio Constantinou
Assessment Research and Development,
Research Division
Shaftesbury Road
Cambridge
CB2 8EA
UK

filio.constantinou@cambridge.org
<https://www.cambridge.org/>

As a department of the university, Cambridge University Press & Assessment is respected and trusted worldwide, managing three world-class examination boards, and maintaining the highest standards in educational assessment and learning. We are a not-for-profit organisation.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment is committed to making our documents accessible in accordance with the WCAG 2.1 Standard. We're always looking to improve the accessibility of our documents. If you find any problems or you think we're not meeting accessibility requirements, contact our team: [Research Division](#)
If you need this document in a different format [contact us](#) telling us your name, email address and requirements and we will respond within 15 working days.

How to cite this publication:

Constantinou, F. (2022, November 9-12). *Creativity in examination question writing: How novel can examination questions really be?* (Paper presentation). Annual conference of the Association for Educational Assessment – Europe (AEA-Europe), Dublin, Ireland.

Abstract

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted calls for a new vision for assessment. Arguably, any attempts at reimagining or reforming the current system should be informed by a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of foundational assessment processes.

One such foundational process that needs to be better understood is the development of written tests. Written tests – whether national, school-based or classroom-based – are widely used in education. Despite their popularity, some dimensions of them continue to be under-researched. One such dimension concerns the creativity involved in the test development process. Creativity is important as it is linked to novelty and, therefore, to the ability to design new questions, that is, questions that are different from those that have occurred in past tests. Designing new questions is a consideration that is particularly relevant to some high-stakes examination contexts where the reuse of questions is not encouraged. One such context is England. In England, for purposes of transparency, high-stakes tests such as GCSEs and A levels are typically made publicly available following the examination session (Baird et al., 2014). Given this practice, it is important for any future examination papers to be sufficiently different from past ones to safeguard the validity of their outcomes.

This study sought to explore the way(s) in which creativity is manifested in the context of examination question writing. To this end, it used two different but complementary sets of data:

(a) 3036 questions obtained from A level examination papers (A levels are high-stakes examinations typically taken by 18-year-old students in England): The questions spanned a range of sciences and humanities subjects, and were subjected to both manual qualitative analysis and automated analyses conducted via a text analysis software package.

(b) One-to-one interviews with seven professional question writers with experience of designing papers for high-stakes examinations: The interviews covered a number of topics including the process of question writing, the challenges it entails and the factors influencing it. The interviewees' responses were subjected to thematic analysis.

The study investigated how creativity is manifested in the language, content and format of examination questions. Language, content and format emerged as the constituent components of examination questions and guided the analysis. While language and content were found to exhibit constrained creativity, format seemed to display very minimal or no creativity.

Overall, examination question writing emerged as a largely constrained process. While question writers seemed to retain a certain degree of personal agency and to have some flexibility to personalise their questions, their writing freedom was restricted by several factors. Some of these were external and related to the conditions of the question writing task (e.g. task completion timeframe), whereas others were internal and related to the nature of the task. Of these two sets of constraints, the latter emerged as more important. This is due to their constant presence: internal constraints cannot be eradicated, as they are a prerequisite for designing high-quality questions. Examples of such internal constraints include: (a) the linguistic conventions with which examination questions need to

comply (driven jointly by the nature of language communication and validity considerations); (b) the content of the syllabus, which dictates the content of examination questions; and (c) the content of past examination papers, which may restrict the topics that could be assessed in future papers.

These internal constraints suggest that the writing of examination questions should not be viewed as a sequence of free choices. Rather, it should be conceptualised as 'some revision of inner speech for a purpose and an audience' (Moffett 1982, p. 233). The purpose and the audience inevitably constrain the writing process. However, as Sharples (1999) notes, these 'constraints should not be seen as restrictions on writing, but as means of focusing the writer's attention and channelling mental resources' (p. 6). As this paper will argue, in examination question writing, constraints should be viewed as means of focusing the question writer's attention on the goal of designing examination papers that are fit for purpose. Therefore, in the context of question writing, constraints are essential.

References

Baird, J., Hopfenbeck, T. N., Elwood, J., Caro, D., & Ahmed, A. (2014). *Predictability in the Irish Leaving Certificate*. Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment Report OUCEA/14/1.

Moffett, J. (1982). Writing, inner speech, and meditation. *College English*, 44 (3), 231-246.

Sharples, M. (1999). *How we write: writing as creative design*. London: Routledge.

Full paper:

Constantinou, F. (2021). How novel can examination questions really be? Exploring the boundaries of creativity in examination question writing. *Research Papers in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2021.1961297>