

The Open Book Examination as an Emerging Assessment Paradigm and Its Challenges

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Abstract

An epistemological perspective on Open Book Examination (OBE) defines it as an assessment method that prioritizes the application of knowledge and understanding over mere memorization. This format highlights the importance of reasoning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills by allowing students to utilize reference materials such as textbooks and notes during exams. OBE aligns with constructivist educational theories.

In the context of education, assessment is regarded as a rational process (Suchman, 1972). Evaluating students provides an opportunity to scrutinize teaching and learning methods, which in turn influences future instructional strategies (Izard, 1992; Johnson, 1977). OBE is one such assessment method, permitting students to consult their textbooks, lecture notes, and other resources while answering questions. This approach focuses more on developing reasoning abilities than on simple fact recall (Tussing, 1951).

Paulo Freire's banking concept of education critiques traditional teaching methods that treat students as passive recipients of information, favouring rote memorization over critical thinking. In contrast, Open Book Examinations encourage active engagement with materials, promoting deeper understanding and the practical application of knowledge. OBE supports Freire's principles of critical pedagogy by allowing students to choose their resources and fostering discussions that respect their viewpoints. This model emphasizes reasoning and problem-solving, transforming the teacher's role from mere information provider to a facilitator of inquiry and understanding. Ultimately, OBE represents a shift away from the banking model, creating a dynamic learning environment that values independent thought, self-reliance, and collaborative knowledge building.

However, concerns regarding diminished original thinking, overdependence on resources, and inadequate evaluation of critical skills have been expressed by Super 30 director Mr. Anand Kumar with open-book exams. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has taken the initiative to implement Open Book Examinations, marking a transition toward more progressive and inclusive educational practices that emphasize understanding and knowledge application. As Dr. Pragya M. Singh, the CBSE Director, noted, the introduction of Open Book Exams is aimed not only at assessing students' memorization abilities but also enhancing their critical thinking and analytical skills (Singh, 2021). By tackling the challenges associated with OBE, CBSE aims to establish a more effective and equitable assessment framework for students.

Key Words: Open Book Examination, Critical Thinking, Constructivism, Educational Assessment

Introduction:

Assessment in education is the key to improving learning outcomes and guiding teaching approaches. This is emphasised in important policies like the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 and is also echoed in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The NCF 2005 stresses on the need for assessment to be comprehensive and multi-dimensional. It should not be used merely as a tool to measure students' performance

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but also for developing their critical thinking, creativity and a deeper understanding of the content. (NCF, 2005) This paradigm also supports formative assessments that provide real-time feedback that educators may use to alter their teaching approaches and interventions in response to students' changing needs. Likewise, the National Education Policy 2020 marks a paradigm shift in assessment methodologies, from rote learning and high-stakes testing to more comprehensive, competency-based assessments that demonstrate real-life applications of knowledge (NEP, 2020).

This policy encourages the use of technology in assessments to enable flexible and individualised assessment methods that cater for students' different learning styles and paces. Both agreements emphasise the necessity to establish assessments that are based on adequately specified learning outcomes so that they are relevant and meaningful to students' learning experience. Formative assessment, self-assessment and peer evaluation can allow instructors to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that celebrates student success, rather than focusing solely on knowledge deficits.

Moreover, proper assessment methods contribute to developing a growth mindset in the learners, which motivates them to perceive challenges as chances to improve, not obstacles (Izard, 1992; Johnson, 1977). Assessment matters in the broadest sense – not merely to measure academic accomplishment, but to develop skills for lifetime learning, to inform policy decisions and to ensure that the education system can respond to the changing demands of society and the economy. This holistic approach sees assessment as an essential of a learner-centred educational system and eventually contributes to the development of holistic individuals that are prepared to thrive in a world of change.

Closed Book Examination to Open Book Examination: A shifting paradigm

Traditional the closed book examinations require students to rely on their memory and understanding alone, without having the aid of reference materials during the assessment process. This method focuses on memorising and rapid recall under the time bound examination pressure. Students sometimes feel the anxiety to demonstrate quickly what they have retained in that very situation, which can lead to a focus on short-term memorisation rather than forming a deeper understanding of the curricular material. With the open book exams students are able to deepen their understanding of the subject matter as they can consult their notes, textbooks and other resources to answer questions in similar time bound manner but with the relaxation of being able to consult reference materials whenever required.

This approach stresses the application, critical thinking and problem solving skills rather than the memorisation (Theophilides & Dionysiou, 1996; Theophilides & Koutselini, 2000). Reference materials enable students to dig deeper into difficult concepts and show their grasp of the subject matter. Through OBEs, students are able to learn more profoundly and use their knowledge in practical situations. Open book exams (OBE) are evaluated quite differently from closed book exams (CBE). OBEs test students' problem-solving and scenario-analysis skills. CBEs test memory recall.

This shift of emphasis facilitates deeper learning, as students can draw on their resources to support their arguments. Thus, OBEs foster understanding of concepts and critical thinking rather than rote memorisation.

Open book exams are a new way to assess students' knowledge. Open-book exams allow students to refer to materials (Hockings, 2010). OBEs are useful for learning, not only for assessing knowledge. OBEs help in reducing test anxiety and encourage understanding as students can look up material. The format teaches students valuable research, evaluation and synthesis skills for academic and real-world settings. OBEs can also encourage lifelong learning as students learn to apply, rather than memorise, leading to better retention and understanding.

Structure and types of OBEs

The primary purpose of Open Book Examinations (OBEs) is to motivate students for deeper and critical learning. Such type of assessments enables students to use a variety of materials and resources and thus encourages them to actively engage with the subject matter (Dayananda et al., 2021). Students will be expected to show that they understand the format by discussing and analysing the uses and relationships of various concepts, some of which are not covered directly in class. The items in the test are relatable and true in the sense that they are based on real-world situations and practices in the discipline, which is in the end increases the validity and applicability of this type of test. This authenticity allows students to bring their theoretical knowledge to real life situations, thus providing a richer learning experience. OBEs generally give students a good amount of time to take the exam. This extra time provides for a more thoughtful and thorough demonstration of their knowledge. But that also means that the grading process is quite rigorous, as the instructors must evaluate the students' ability to synthesise information and apply it well.

Open Book Examinations (OBEs) are usually classified into two distinct types: Traditional and Take-Home, each having its own structure and implications for student assessment (Giri & Baskey, 2023). Traditional OBEs usually require students to take the exam in a controlled environment with a specific venue and time set in advance. These assessments are generally paper and pencil and require immediate recall and application of knowledge. Some notes and facilitative materials may be allowed, but they are generally more restricted, forcing students to rely heavily on their comprehension of the material when taking the exam. Take-Home OBEs, meanwhile, are a more flexible option, allowing students to take the exam outside the bounds of a classroom.

This type allows for submission in a longer, defined time frame, removing the pressure of time constraints and encouraging more extensive research and critical engagement with the subject matter. Students have more notes, more resources, so they are able to piece the information together better and be able to respond with more thought." In conclusion, these two types of OBEs cover the spectrum of assessment strategies open to educators, catering to a range of learning objectives and encouraging a range of skills among students. Apart from the conventional and take home, there are a number of other innovative formats under Open Book Examinations (OBEs).

All of them are designed for specific educational objectives. In the digital age, the popularity of Open Book Online Examination is growing, where students can use electronic resources during the exam. This format offers flexibility for students to access the online materials and databases in a way they would in real life where information is available on demand. This fosters a setting in which students are forced to adeptly traverse digital resources, honing skills in information literacy and source evaluation, crucial in today's data-driven world. The Hybrid or Partial Open Book Examination is another innovative format that strikes a balance between open and closed book examinations. This model allows students to bring certain materials such as a formula sheet or a limited set of notes, but no other resources are permitted. This restricting access makes the students focus on understanding the important concepts rather than having a variety of material and this helps them to understand the subject better.

Moreover, the Scenario-Based Open Book Examination challenges students to solve difficult real-life scenarios or problems by applying their knowledge and resources to formulate well-considered solutions. This format encourages the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, requiring students to analyse situations not only from an academic or narrow perspective but rather from a holistic perspective and consider multiple viewpoints. To summarise, the different forms of OBEs indicate a shifting move towards more practical and utility-oriented assessment method that prepare students to address more real-world problems in their respective fields.

Prerequisites to Open Book Examination

Before an institution performs an Open Book Examination (OBE) there are a few prerequisites that need to be in place to ensure that the assessment experience is a success. The very first step to be taken by the instructor is to frame the examination questions properly keeping in mind the objectives of an OBE. Rather, it calls for the writing of sophisticated, application-based questions that demand students analyse, synthesise, and apply their knowledge to real-world situations, rather than just recollect information. OBEs should ideally promote critical thinking abilities and stay clear of memory-based questions when taken into practice. Educators should also provide explicit guidelines for the usage of reference materials, stating which particular resources are to be allowed during the examination and how students are expected to perform in terms of working together. This clarity is vital to guide students in their preparation and to grasp the aim of the examination, which is to promote a greater understanding of the subject matter.

Another important requirement is establishing a good structure for time management and exam administration. The instructors need to decide the proper period of time for the OBE that allows the flexibility of resource access and timely completion. This necessitates considerable thought to the intricacy of the questions and the expected time students will need to investigate and develop answers. Also, to address issues with academic integrity, faculty should employ tactics to deter cheating and plagiarism, such as the use of different question sets or scenario-based prompts that require original ideas. Finally, it is important to establish an environment that is conducive to students' learning experiences. This can include pre-exam workshops to familiarise students with the exam format and expectations, helping them gain confidence and enabling efficient engagement with the subject. By overcoming these conditions, instructors will be able to develop a planned and meaningful OBE that will foster critical thinking and genuine comprehension.

Open book exams change the traditional evaluation technique focusing on critical analysis, implementation of information and acquisition of practical skills. Open book tests, in contrast to its counterpart that typically tests the rote memorisation, require pupils to examine, synthesise and apply material in a meaningful way. This method of examination encourages students to learn the subject matter at a deeper level. Students have to go through their materials, uncover important knowledge and use it effectively to answer hard queries. The assessments encourage independent learning and students are expected to organise their own study resources and make detailed notes or idea maps in preparation for the exam. This preparatory procedure not only enables them to understand the subject more, but it also increases their ability to manage and use resources properly. This is a very useful skill in a professional environment where knowledge and the ability to use it correctly is important. Open book exams also mimic real-life situations where people generally have access to reference resources and thereby bridging the gap between academic learning and practical application and making the learning process more meaningful and exciting for pupils.

Moreover, open book examinations can offer a less stressful assessment environment, which may reduce anxiety and improve performance for some students. The availability of notes and textbooks can alleviate the pressure of memorizing large volumes of information, allowing students to focus on the critical aspects of

problem-solving and analysis. This approach, however, requires educators to carefully design questions that challenge students to think deeply rather than merely retrieve information. By doing so, educators can help prevent over-reliance on materials and ensure that students engage in meaningful learning processes.

Additionally, the open book format encourages continuous learning, as the study aids and organized notes students create often become valuable resources for future courses or professional development. It also emphasizes the importance of academic integrity, as students learn to properly cite sources and maintain ethical standards when using reference materials. Through these practices, open book examinations not only assess students' current understanding but also equip them with skills that are transferable to lifelong learning and professional success.

OBE and Critical Pedagogy: Bridging the Gap

Critical pedagogy, as Freire defined it, is “the practice of teaching with an awareness of social, political, and cultural forces that shape one’s reality” (Freire, 1970). It aims to create a classroom climate where students interact critically with content, interrogate hegemonic beliefs, and build their ability to interrogate and reframe knowledge. OBE is quite appropriate in this context since it promotes critical thinking and application of knowledge rather than rote memorisation. In an OBE setting, students need to deal with a wide range of materials, integrate information and apply concepts to difficult issues or situations. The approach requires students to engage with the subject at a deeper level, since they must evaluate the relevance and usefulness of many sources, rather than just memorising pre-packaged information.

OBE also supports Freire’s focus on the co-construction of knowledge. In open book examinations, the teacher transforms from being the exclusive repository of knowledge into a facilitator of investigation, helping pupils through many perspectives and deciphering difficult data. This results in a situation where students may relate the subject matter to real life applications which is a major element of critical pedagogy (Biggs & Tang, 2011). It helps children to perceive learning as an active process that takes place outside of the classroom and gives them a sense of agency in their learning journey. OBE promotes more participative and dialogic learning where knowledge is co-constructed by students and teachers and where students can add their own experiences and understandings to the process of evaluation. where youngsters memorise facts without thinking critically. This strategy generally results in examination systems that focus on memorisation and not knowledge, with little scope to use information in new situations. Open book exams, on the other hand, break this pattern by shifting the focus from rote memorisation to application of information. OBE therefore challenges the passive role students are required to play in the banking model and advocates students as active learners critically engaged with the learning information.

OBE enables a change in the way students' study and prepare, as they have access to reference materials throughout tests. Students are not needed to memorise facts, but rather to become familiar with essential concepts, gain a thorough comprehension of their subject, and plan how effectively to use their resources in the examination. Such a preparation process is a more true learning, where the focus is on understanding, synthesis and problem solving (Giroux, 2011; Brookfield, 2017). In this way, OBE serves as a foil to the rigorous structure of the banking model, creating a learning environment in which students are assessed on their ability to think critically and apply knowledge, rather than on their ability to regurgitate memorised information.

Practical Implications and Challenges of implementing OBE

OBE has many advantages for the promotion of critical pedagogy but it also needs to be carefully related to some elements for its proper implementation. First, teachers have to write exam questions that require critical thinking and analysis, not just the ability to find content quickly. This is a pedagogical shift where teachers design

complex, multi-dimensional, open-ended assessments. Students also need to be able to scan resources efficiently and be able to manage their time properly in open book exams. This is in keeping with Freire's idea that learners should be able to read texts critically and to get major insights from them. A possible downside of OBE, however, is the danger of an over-reliance on reference books. Students may become overly focused on finding the "right" answer from their notes and not work through the subject. In return, teachers should emphasise the importance of understanding basic concepts and synthesising information from many sources. They should build a classroom culture that fosters inquiry and reflection so that the use of resources in OBE is a supplement (not a substitute) to a solid understanding of the subject matter.

One of the most significant tasks of OBE teachers is designing questions. The goal is to generate questions that are not just about recollection, but that require students to think at a higher level. Questions should be framed in such a way that it will require students to analyse, synthesise and apply the knowledge acquired. They should be aligned with the learning outcomes being targeted. The questions should be simple, concise and clearly related to the primary themes of the course. It also helps to foster deeper learning in pupils. Besides developing good questions, teachers need to underline rules and guidance for students. The conditions of the examination must be properly disclosed including the sources that can be used as references, the criteria for citing sources, the time constraints and other rules. Having this clarity helps to ensure that the playing field is level and there is no confusion when taking the test which leads to a fairer assessment system.

Another important responsibility is the selection and approval of resources. And, depending on the type of exam, professors may have to decide what resources students can bring into the exam. This stage is intended to ensure that students have access to the correct resources and that the integrity of the assessment is not compromised. Careful choice of materials can also introduce students to key works that underlie their understanding of the given area. Teachers have a major role to monitor academic integrity as well. This highlights the need for teachers to educate students on the ethical and appropriate use of materials because it can become hard to tell the difference between working together and cheating on open-book exams. If the tests are taken in person, teachers might need to invigilate the exam setting to prevent cheating. The integrity of the assessment process in online examinations can be maintained by the use of plagiarism detection techniques and holistic assessment of student contributions. Also helpful are comments and help after the examination. It teaches students what they are good at and where they need improvement, making the test more of a learning experience, rather than a simple marking system. Teachers can also go over any misconceptions that occurred during the exam and provide other resources for continued study. This feedback loop is vital for supporting the goals of OBE and helping children to keep moving forward.

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing OBE

OBE has great potential benefits but teachers confront several problems in its implementation. Writing good questions that involve critical thinking and application of knowledge is one of the most difficult things to do. Creating questions that are both tough enough and relevant takes time and there is a concern that students may become overly reliant on their materials if badly prepared questions are used without a solid comprehension of the subject matter. Teachers should provide questions that will help measure the student's capacity to think critically and synthesise knowledge.

Another pertinent issue is dealing with academic integrity in an open book environment. Students can have different reference materials and the possibility of plagiarism or misusing resources is higher than in traditional tests. Teachers need to combine access to resources and rigour to discourage academic dishonesty. It's not just about watching student behaviour, it's about building a culture of academic integrity and emphasising the necessity of proper source citation.

Another problem is time management, for both the teacher and the student. For example, teachers need to help students learn how to manage their time successfully in the exam, by imposing time limitations for different portions or giving ideas on managing time. Teachers also need to spend time in planning and marking open book assessments which may take longer to mark than traditional exams because of the depth and complexity of students' responses.

Another big barrier is the logistical difficulties of operating OBE, particularly online. The examination procedure can be interrupted by technical challenges such as problems accessing online platforms or submitting work. Teachers should have a contingency plan in place and offer technical support or accommodations to pupils who experience these problems. Open book exams require much flexibility and adaptability to unforeseen circumstances for smooth conduct of the exams.

Finally, the OBE process is a constant improvement and adaption process. Teachers are obliged to consider the success of each test and are willing to modify the next tests. This includes improving questions, changing criteria and incorporating student comments. However this process can be a drain on resources, calling for continual professional development and a willingness to change teaching approaches. It also requires a willingness to experiment and adapt to new assessment methods, which can be a challenge in institutions with well entrenched old assessment practices.

Institutional Challenges in Implementing the Open Book Examination (OBE) Framework

Open Book Examinations (OBE), have its own advantages, such promoting critical thinking and application of information but the implementation of the same is not without its obstacles. Institution implementing this framework need to resolve a range of logistical, academic and pedagogical challenges so that OBE could be a successful tool for evaluation. These problems can impact the uniformity, fairness and general effectiveness of the examination process, especially in big academic contexts. These obstacles need to be understood and addressed by institutions that want to embed OBE in their evaluation frameworks.

Risk of Over-Dependence on Resources

A major worry in the implementation of OBE is the tendency of students to be too dependent on their resources when taking their exams. This dependency might impede the building of a profound comprehension of the subject matter, as students could concentrate more on the act of finding knowledge rather than truly grasping and absorbing the fundamental principles. Institutions need to be very careful in designing their exams so that availability of materials does not undercut the depth of learning. They need help in asking questions that engender critical thinking, rather than information finding, and schools need to invest in training and resources to help them do that.

Academic Integrity Issues

Academic integrity is a major concern for colleges when it comes to open book exams. In a typical closed book setting, the danger of students plagiarising, copying straight from their resources or cooperating with their classmates during the exam is lower than in a non-traditional open book format. The task is more tough in online OBE because it is harder to observe what students are doing. Institutions should have strong integrity mechanisms in place (plagiarism detection software, etc.) and should be clear with students and faculty on the necessity of citation procedures. Furthermore, it is important to develop a culture of academic honesty and it requires continuous education and awareness campaigns on ethical behaviour in assessments.

Complexity of Designing Questions

Institutions are faced with the great task of coming up with questions that are designed to test higher order thinking skills that are critical to the success of OBE. These questions should not be constructed to only retrieve facts, but instead require students to use analytical and evaluative skills. That can be a tricky challenge for teachers. Badly constructed questions can enable pupils to get answers straight from their resources, without showing profound understanding. Institutions should offer professional development opportunities for professors to enhance their skills in designing questions. This may involve workshops, faculty collaboration, and development of question banks that support OBE goals.

Problems of Time Management for Students

Time management is a common difficulty of students in open book exams with implications for institutional evaluation strategies. Students usually spend too long browsing their materials and not enough time thinking out intelligent responses. Institutions could want to give some guidance to the educators on what the proper time restriction is and how can the exam be structured so that time is used efficiently. Furthermore, providing time management courses or tools for students helps ease these issues so that students can perform well under the conditions of an open book exam.

Grading Difficulty

Grading open book exams can be more time-consuming and subjective than grading traditional exams. OBE exams tend to judge the quality of reasoning, analysis and application of information, and hence the evaluators need to be sensitive to subtle features of student responses. This complexity can lead to grading inconsistencies, particularly in big classrooms or with several professors. For grading to be fair and consistent, institutions need to have defined rubrics and grading criteria. Also, teaching the instructors on OBE relevant grading techniques may aid in addressing these problems and facilitating the evaluation process.

No Standardisation Between Courses

Another major institutional problem is the consistency of OBE implementation across courses and faculty. Variations in the difficulty of open-book tests, the sorts of resources permitted, and the grading methods can result in differing student experiences and outcomes. The lack of standardisation may cause feelings of injustice and may impair the overall credibility of the testing process. Therefore, institutions are required to formulate universal rules for the implementation of OBE, including question design, selection of resources and evaluation criteria, to attain a common approach in different courses and departments.

Student Resource Overload

In open book exams, students can bring a wide variety of reference books which can lead to a resource overload. Students may be overwhelmed by the amount of information they have to deal with when they have access to many textbooks, notes and digital resources and this could affect their ability to find useful information efficiently. This difficulty requires explicit institutional norms on what and how many resources can be employed during tests. Teachers should be educated to help students organise their resources in an efficient way, helping to lessen the cognitive burden during the examination.

Logistical issues in big classes

There are a variety of logistical issues in delivering open book exams in big class settings in universities. As class enrolment grows, it becomes more difficult to monitor academic integrity, provide resources and oversee

the submission process. Seating arrangements and monitoring for face-to-face exams should be carefully considered to create a conducive environment for resource-based evaluations. More challenges in the provision of stable internet connectivity and technological support for students are related with online tests. There are additional logistical challenges to be tackled, such as the necessity for proctoring services, online test platforms, IT support, which means institutions need to allocate the appropriate resources.

Limited Assessment, Some Skills

OBE is handy in measuring critical thinking and application but may not be the greatest approach to measure skills such as memory and quick recall which are vital in some sectors. Classic closed book exams may be a more suitable way of assessing careers such as medicine or policing that require instantaneous decisions based on memorised knowledge. Relying just on OBE may lead to the omission of these skills in the assessment, which poses a challenge for institutions to formulate a holistic assessment method. Institutions could also combine open and closed book assessments to get the complete measure of students' ability.

Students' Well-being and Test Anxiety

Open book exams are frequently thought to be less stressful than traditional tests. However, some students have reported worry about the open-ended nature of the questions and the sheer volume of resources available. With this variation in student experiences it is difficult for institutions to ensure that OBE contributes to, rather than detracts from, student well-being. Workshops on good study skills, coping with exam stress and how to organise resources for open book examinations can assist to reduce anxiety and lead to a more positive assessment experience.

Conclusion

The move towards Open Book Examinations (OBE) is a major shift in the way we assess learning, focusing on the understanding and critical thinking of knowledge, rather than the memorisation of information. It is in line with constructivist educational philosophies, which enable students to be active in learning materials and apply their knowledge in real settings. In contrast to Paulo Freire's "banking concept of education" in which pupils are seen as passive receptacles of knowledge, OBE supports active participation and learner-directed learning. OBE promotes a culture of independent thinking and reasoning abilities by providing students access to reference materials during exams, to investigate, analyse and apply information.

The adoption of OBE by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is a paradigm change to a forward-looking educational approach centred on understanding and application. "Through this initiative, the aim is to test the students' memory and to develop their critical and analytical thinking skills," says Dr Pragya M Singh. The CBSE aims at making assessment system more equitable and balanced by integrating OBE in assessment framework to respond to the different learning needs of students. But there are obstacles that come with this change. Anand Kumar, among others, warns of possible pitfalls, such as the risk of less unique thinking and too much dependence on resources. Such issues show that OBE is a possible alternative to traditional examinations but needs to be applied thoughtfully so that it effectively cultivates critical thinking abilities, without diminishing students' capacity to produce original ideas. OBE is a testimony to the changing nature of assessment in education.

It questions traditional forms of student assessment that value understanding and critical thinking. This approach has been adopted and further developed by education boards such as the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). With such broad-based adoption, OBE could revolutionise the assessment landscape, nurturing a generation of learners with the skills to thrive in an ever-evolving and complex world. The success of Open and Distance Learning (OBE) will be dependent on the extent to which instructors can balance the strengths and limits of the curriculum, ultimately creating a program that encourages both creative expression and intellectual achievement.

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