Marking and Things

Well last week I spent many days and nights marking exam papers and courseworks. In academia there seems to be an increasing amount of work to do, and often lecturers will work many more hours per week than they are meant to. So, I thought I would outline the weighting that marking exam papers and courseworks have on academics, and show that, for large classes, it takes as long to mark student's work, as it does to actually teach the subject.

This year I was allocated to the NOS and also had to teach two other subjects: CNDS and DCC. Over the past few weeks here's what I have marked:

Module	Exam questions marked (@2min/ question)	Courseworks (@ 5min/ coursework)	Total (min)
CNDS	240 questions = 480mins	100 courseworks = 500mins	980
NOS	180 questions = 360mins	65 courseworks = 325mins	685
DCC	86 questions = 170mins	(included in CNDS calculation)	170

Total = 1835 hrs

I've assumed that it takes two minutes to mark an exam question (which is possibly an underestimate), and five minutes to mark a coursework.

CNDS has obviously the most weighting, closely followed by NOS. Thus I spent a total of 1,835 minutes marking exam questions and courseworks. This equates to 30.8 hours, or five whole working days (but, of course, there's no time to mark the papers at work, so it equates to five days of my own time (weekends and nights, mostly). This also does not include the collating and checking of the marks.

The final marks seem to be well spread and the averages look fine. Thus one must assess whether the time spent was actually worth it in terms of assessing the learning outcomes. I really do not think so, as examinations have never really been the best method of assessing learning outcomes. But these days courseworks typically a greal deal of cut-and-paste information from the WWW. So how can we properly assess learning outcomes? Well a Viva (an oral examination) is really the best way to test outcomes, but many students would struggle with these. The solution I think is it move towards a multiple choice examination, with coursework, and a small written examination. But the multiple choice examination must be designed properly, in that it must test the intellectual qualities of the student, and not just be a test of knowledge. So next

year I intend to spend many hours before the examination in designing a proper system so that it will have a less loading on the marking after the exam.

Many academics are against multiple choice examination, but after completing the Cisco Academy I can see their strengths (and also their weaknesses). The main thing is that there should be some working-out in some of the more difficult questions. It does no good for students to simply guess answers. The questions should also not be vague. Here's a good example of a vague question from the Cisco Academy:

What is the definition of a WAN:
A   A low-speed connection
B   Connection over a local area
C   ...
D   ...

The actual answer was A, which was a low-speed connection. I, personally, would strongly disagree with this, as WAN connections can be just as fast as local area connections. In fact a modem can give access to a LAN and can operate on a few thousand bits per second, whereas WAN, such as EaStMAN, can have hundreds of megabits per second, and now billions of bits per second. Also, in this question the actually definition of the WAN, related to its speed, is a poor one, as it should really relate to a geographical spread over a city and region.

--- William J.Buchanan, Feb 21, 2001

Bill, your time is being wasted by all this marking, it would be better spent teaching multimedia.

I agree with the part about exams, they only test what the student has memorised the night before and forgotten the night after.

Comment on this essay from a Napier student, May 2001