Module N: Exam Preparation – Targetting

As we mentioned in Module 2, we take the pragmatic approach that if your professor tests for something, it is important. These modules have been designed to provide you with skills to decide what is important, and to study in appropriate ways to meet those requirements of your courses. Therefore, to the extent that you have been practicing these study skills throughout the term, you have already been preparing for your final exams. In Modules N, O, and P, we will try to tie it all together by reviewing and refining the skills you have learned so far, and by showing how you can apply these skills to writing exams.

Seven common reasons for disappointing results on tests are:

1. misjudging content to be tested (“What’s Important?”)
2. misjudging level of abstraction (remember Bloom’s Taxonomy?)
3. misjudging the “learning channel” (remember Houghton?) or format of questions
4. spending insufficient time studying
5. using passive study techniques
6. misjudging the requirements of an exam question
7. getting too anxious in the exam

This module will address the first three of these. Module O will address problems related directly with studying (4., and 5.). Module P will address problems you may experience as you are actually writing the exam (6. and 7.).

1. Misjudging Content to be Tested

It has been said that the average course requires a student to have knowledge of about 200 items of information. The question is, “Which 200?” The modules that dealt with gathering information – Module B: Survey Reading; Module C: The 3R Method; Module D: Reading and Mind Mapping; and Module K: Notemaking – provide ways to sift through the information you are exposed to in a course. The skills and procedures in these modules help you take advantage of the following indicators of important material.

Readings

• Position: beginning or ending. This applies to material of any length – a chapter, a subsection of a chapter, or a paragraph.
• Size: if it’s bigger, it’s more important. Texts often have a hierarchy of sizes for titles of chapters, subsections, sub-subsections, and so on, indicating relative level of importance.
• Graphic emphasis: italics, boldfacing, color, lists, graphs, illustrations, and so on.
• Space: if it takes up more space, it’s more important. For example, a concept that is illustrated by a detailed summary of a study may be assumed to be more important that one that is presented in a less detailed way.
• Repetition: the more often something is repeated, the more important it is.
• Direct Statement: e.g. “x is an important concept.”

Lecture

• Position: beginning or ending of lecture.
• Repetition: if a professor goes over something more than once, it is important.
• Use of specific pointers: “This is important”; “That would make a good exam question”; “Make a note of that”; etc.
• Volume: some professors may speak more loudly when presenting an important point.
• Change in tone of voice.
• Expression of emotion or interest.
• Use of illustrations or examples.
• Amount of time spent on a topic.
• Elaboration: going into detail, drawing connections, discussing implications or effects, and so on.
• Change in style of presentation: asking a question, for example.
• Multimedia presentation: use of overhead projector, blackboard, film, etc.

Other indicators of importance

• Assignments, homework, syllabus.
• Repetition of lecture material in text or other readings.
• Consensus among your classmates that an item is important.
• Old exams (see Module 1).
• Logical or meaningful association. We remember by association. Most courses only have a few basic themes, by which the course content is organized and interrelated. If you discover what these important themes are, and if you associate detailed items with these major themes, you will remember those items more easily.

**Task 1 (Take an Inventory)**

Fortunately, for the most part, we remember content that is emphasized, simply because the techniques people use to emphasize an item are intentionally the same techniques that assist memory. So a logical initial strategy in deciding what is important, is to find out what you remember, and work from there. An effective way to do this is to write down everything you can remember of the course from memory. A mind map may be effective for this.

Using a large sheet of paper (1 meter square should do – you can get a sheet from the Learning Skills Drop in Center), do a mind map of everything you have learned in the course. This activity will provide a transition between targeting and studying by telling you exactly what you know about the course content and by providing you with an excellent review. Give yourself about 3 hours to do this, and try to do it in one day, although not necessarily at one sitting. Be inclusive – leave nothing out. And BE SURE TO DO THIS ENTIRE ACTIVITY FROM MEMORY – no peeking at text or notes! You must not only target the items to be tested: you must also target your own weak points as areas for studying – and this activity will give you a good indication of what you don’t know.

**Task 2 (Get the Big Picture)**

Look at the mind map you did and your other materials – midterms, Cornell Notes, study cards, sheets you have made to help you with problem solving activities (Module M), etc. Re-establish for yourself the major themes of the course. The act of working with the “big picture” will help you recall content and concepts by providing a greater number of associations among aspects of the course. Make a list of the major themes and subthemes that you expect to appear on the test.

### 2. Misjudging Level of Abstraction

Misinterpreting the level of abstraction (see the discussion on Bloom’s Taxonomy, in Module 1) at which you will be tested can lead to disastrous results: imagine spending all your time studying terms and definitions (“knowledge” level), then being tested on your ability to solve word problems (“application” level). Use the following guidelines to help you target the level of abstraction at which to study:

1. **Knowledge – Recognition and Recall.** Never trust your ability to recognize a correct answer – always study for recall (i.e., be able to reproduce the material from memory).

2. **Comprehension.** Comprehension involves explaining something, such as a definition or example, in one’s own words. To do this, one must know the definition and be able to explain the significance of each of its components to someone who doesn’t know about the topic. People often make the mistake of thinking they can “talk their way through” this sort of question, without knowing the definition (for example). Don’t make this mistake.

3. **Application.** Application occurs when you are required to use theory to explain or process concrete examples. Practice providing examples of applications of the terminology you have learned – although you may have memorized the definition of “irony,” this is no guarantee that you could create an example, or find an example in a novel. Application questions require you to identify abstract characteristics within an example, and perhaps perform some sort of operation on these elements – for example, solving word problems in the hard sciences.

4. **Critical Thinking – Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation.** Critical thinking is often evaluated in essays or essay-type assignments. Even when it is not, you are best off to use the study techniques you would use to prepare to write an essay.

Each level is based on all lower levels, and try to study at one level higher than the one at which you will be tested. (If you study at more than one level higher, you may get too abstract, and forget to study the details).

Specific tips on study strategies for the levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy are provided in Module O.
Task 3 (Debrief: Analyze Results of Past Study Strategies)

Referring back to your completed Module 1, look at your old exams, and your Relevant Course Activity Worksheets. Now, think back to your midterms, or refer to them if you have them available. Were there any unpleasant surprises, or were you on target with your analysis of activities and levels of abstraction to practice when studying? Do an updated Relevant Course Activity Worksheet incorporating any new information.

3. Misjudging the “Learning Channel” or Format of Questions

Review Houghton’s “Learning Channels,” and make sure you are matching your study channels with those you will have to use in your exam. For example, if you will have to identify specimens, practice identifying specimens as much as possible, rather than reading descriptions of specimens.

If you are going to be required to write an essay on your exam, practice by writing essays. If your exam will have a time limit (they all do) then make sure you practice meeting the requirements of typical questions within that time limit: for example, if you have to write an essay within half an hour, without referring to your text or notes, practice doing this within the time limit.

Task 4 (Compose Practice Exam Questions)

1. Referring to your Inventory mind map, Cornell Notes, Syllabus Summary, Relevant Course Activity Worksheets, professor’s comments, and old exams and midterms, make up questions that meet the following criteria:
   - they address important aspects of the course
   - they are at the appropriate level of Bloom’s Taxonomy
   - they are in an appropriate format (multiple choice, short answer, essay) and in the appropriate “learning channel”

   A tip: one can make up essay questions without knowing the answer, but one cannot do this with multiple choice questions. To get practice writing multiple choice questions, form a study group, and arrange for each person to compose questions for the other members to answer.

2. Bring these materials to an appointment with your Learning Skills Counsellor, to discuss targetting your studying.

TASK SUMMARY

To complete this module, you should do the following:

1. Do an inventory – from memory – of everything you have learned in the course.
2. List the course’s major themes and subthemes.
3. Re-do at least one Relevant Course Activity Worksheet for a course in which you expect to face a challenging exam.
4. Make up practice exam questions.