AGAINST continuous assessment and modular examinations
FOR undivided final summative examinations

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Graded coursework means work done by students that is marked and counts towards the final mark, either instead of or alongside a mark from an examination. This could be a project or some other work that cannot easily be reproduced in an examination. Given the choice between five essays done under examination conditions during the year, or two essays in two hours during the examination season, it makes a lot of sense for students to write five essays. Similarly, a project or longer essay done outside class can provide more training and be a better measure of a student than that provided by an examination.

I am not totally against graded coursework *per se,* if by graded coursework you mean project work and other forms of realistic work that cannot be produced under examination conditions.

Continuous assessment means regular pieces of work, or regular short tests, carried out during the learning process.

Modular examinations means part of the curriculum formally examined before the whole curriculum has been taught.

Summative examinations means examinations at the end of the course at the highest level for that qualification. In the 1970s in Britain, the school examinations at the age of 16 ('O' level and CSE level) covered two years of work, and the 'A' level examinations at the age of 18 also covered two years of work and to 'A' level standard. In Science this meant a whole suite of examinations in which any part of the syllabus could be asked about in any examination. In the humanities there might be different papers on different topics, but the standard is still 'A' level.

Nowadays 'A' levels are divided up, the first half called 'AS' level and the second half is called 'A2' level. Commonly, 'AS' levels are taken after only one year of study, and 'A2' levels are taken after two years of study.

Continuous assessment is totally unfair and wrong. It is perhaps a truism that teachers tend to teach using methods they liked when they were learners. Therefore this provocation comes from my own learning history - from my own joys and sorrows - and from my own prejudices. **If coursework had been significant in my examination history, then I would probably have failed - even in my best subjects. Let me explain.**

In 1976 I took Nuffield Physics 'A' level, which was a two year course of ten modules with internal school tests at the end of each module. All of the modules were evaluated by a formal examination - which, fortunately for me, counted only for the school grades, and NOT for the final grade in the 'A' level.

I failed the first eight modules. I failed miserably and consistently. Yet in the ninth and tenth modules I suddenly found I was near the top of the class of twenty or so keen bright students. I went on to get a good grade in this my worst though most interesting subject.

What if all the examinations of ten modules (after 6-8 weeks of work) had contributed to my final grade? I might even have failed overall!! This would have been absurd. Why should a grade of a previous year mean failure in the subject? Surely, **it is my ability at the end of the course that counts, not my ability during the course.**

The second reason though is more important here. **It can take over a year, maybe two years, for students to learn a subject.** This means over a year of constantly struggling both to understand the concepts, and to learn fluently the language of the subject. There is a real dilemma faced by students and by teachers as to what to learn first. Until the concepts and other related concepts are learned then the vocabulary is difficult to grasp. Until the vocabulary is grasped, then you have no way of handling the subject. And, In science, frequently concepts are interlinked and it is extremely difficult to put an iron box round one part and learn it without reference to other areas of science. In my experience in physics, I only begun to understand all the modules when I had almost finished them all. The module tests, every 6-8 weeks were helpful as a means of summarising the module. They would have been disastrous if the marks had been counted towards the final grade.

In fact, in the last two modules of physics, suddenly many pieces of the jigsaw began to hang together: I could not fully understand the early modules until I had done the later modules. The later modules could not have been attempted without the foundation of the earlier modules. In addition, the last modules provided an integrating function that enhanced the details and the overall principles. In the end, it is this integration that has stayed with me and been useful, and is best measured with a final summative examination.

Because I found the subject difficult I did as much easy work as I could - and that meant reading round the subject. Inevitably my reading ranged further than the classwork, and further than the current specific module. It was a habit in the final examinations of Nuffield

sciences to present so called 'unknown' information and invite the student to reason from first principles and apply what they knew. Far from being frightening to me, I loved this way of studying and doing examinations. I found repeatedly that I had already read about the 'unknown' in my background reading, therefore I had an advantage over the brighter but less well read friends. This area of knowledge only showed really developed and showed itself in the examinations. Continuous assessment would have distracted me from this highly desirable part of the subject.

Thirdly, **there are some skills that take more than a year to learn**, and to give a graded test where the mark actually counts, and a bad mark of over a year ago is held against a student, is grossly unfair. This is a true story from my teaching years. I was new in the school, teaching fourth year chemistry. A significant part of that year was spent explaining and practicing chemical formulae. Now even though chemistry was a favourite subject for me, and basic chemical formulae had never been particularly difficult, I did though sympathise with the struggles of the students. Early in the year, a student, struggling, asked me if I could make the lessons simpler and break the material up into smaller easier parts. I replied that I could not. He need not worry though. Most pupils felt that way for at least six months. All he had to do was to keep trying the regular exercises, by the end of the school year he would have learned it.

Evidently he disliked the reply, because later the deputy head received a complaint from his parent. Had I really told a student it would take over six months to understand? Was it really true I could not make the subject any easier? Could I really not break it into smaller more understandable parts? As a young teacher, I remember taking a deep breath and boldly saying that I had made the remark: I stood by what I had said, and if he wanted confirmation, he only had to ask other science teachers.

The basics of chemical formulae and equations of reactions usually take a year to learn. There are no short cuts. Graded coursework would be wrong for such topics.

Fourthly, **some students are late starters**; they need more time to assimilate knowledge than others do. Continuous assessment unfairly penalises late starters.

It seems in Britain that this viewpoint has been largely ignored, especially in the development of half-A levels, where it is possible, though not obligatory, to do separate yearly examinations instead of doing the traditional 'A' level route of examinations after two years of study. I similarly view with horror the American university system of small distinct modules and credits. Focusing on grading in small steps takes away from the focus on learning. **Inevitably if a series of small grades are required this will devalue the subject because people will concentrate on the material and skills best suited to small tests. Postponing the real tests to formal examinations allows questions to be set that range across the whole subject and provides a measure of attainment at the point where a student has finished the studies.**

I am against continuous assessment which counts towards the final mark. Internal marked

coursework and short tests prove a useful diagnostic function, and provide badly needed feedback to students. They are extremely important. But we must not misuse them and turn them into continuous assessment. When I teach classes in advanced writing I expect students to regularly provide me with work to correct. I give marks - but the marks do NOT count towards the examination. That would be unfair. I expect students to learn and improve during the year. In some cases I expect them to go from miserable failure to a good pass. If coursework were included in the examinations, then lower competence of the past would be included.

It can be argued that final summative assessment is unfair in other ways. In particular, students could have a bad day, could be too frightened, and, if the examinations are only once a year, they provide little opportunity for recovery from a failure.

The answers to this I hope are obvious. If there is only one summative examination - maybe with only one essay in it, then there might be the some reason to dismiss summative assessment. But in England, at least for ‘A’ levels, students do more than one examination, and almost never do just one essay. Sciences in particular might involve an essay paper, a comprehension paper, a short answer/structured paper, a Multiple Choice paper, and a practical examination, as well as a project or extended essay. One bad day is not going to greatly influence the results under such a system.