If the answer is instant, the question is pointless

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With the testing season here again, I am reminded of something that bothers me whenever I have to invigilate the start of a public exam. It doesn't matter what the subject or level is: after the tedious preliminaries that end with "You may begin", the same thing always happens: students open their papers and start writing. After about 10 seconds, most have turned to page two. Are they rushing and panicking? Perhaps some are, but not all.

My problem is: what can these questions be like if they can be completed with so little consideration? Any question that can be answered so instantaneously is not worth asking.

This is mere recall – simply a knee-jerk response. We are not probing real thinking with such questions. This is why exam booklets have grown so large. To occupy candidates for an hour or two with this sort of material, examiners have to get busy producing pages and pages of little questions. In many subjects, it seems that when the candidates hand in their scripts, many of the words in the booklets were there already, and students have been mostly filling in the gaps. (The more printed content, the more potential for errors; hence the embarrassingly large number of errata that sometimes need to be read out at the start.)

This year, a few high-flying sixth-form students at our school sat the British Mathematical Olympiad paper – a demanding three-and-a-half-hour exam requiring full written solutions to very challenging problems.

A colleague who had been invigilating part of this exam was consequently a few minutes late to her Year 9 class. She explained on her arrival that she had been with some sixth-formers who were doing a three-and-a-half-hour maths exam. The pupils were astounded that such a thing was possible, but their amazement was mainly at how unimaginably thick must be a paper that could occupy such clever people for so long. In fact, the entire exam consists of six questions, typed on one side of a piece of A5 paper.

We need to get back to exam styles that allow pupils time to think about questions that are worth thinking about. Teachers know that quick-fire question-and-answer sessions in class are limited in what they can achieve. The same is true in the exam room. Short, closed questions are easy to ask, answer, and – crucially – mark. But do we want to turn out young people who can deal with only one thought at a time, and are never pushed to think about anything for more than a few seconds?

The exam paper keeps up a constant stream of gabble, with the poor candidate having to fight for a chance to get a word in edgeways and show what they understand and can do. A better system would create space to let candidates express themselves, and would give the examiner far more useful data with which to judge their capability.

Instant Answers, Colin Foster

With the examination season upon us once again, I am reminded of something that always bothers me whenever I am called on to invigilate the start of a public examination. It doesn't matter what the subject or level of qualification is. After the tedious preliminaries, culminating with "You may begin", the same thing always happens. The pupils open their papers, and almost immediately start writing. After about ten to fifteen seconds, most of them have turned over onto page 2. Are they rushing and panicking? Perhaps some are, but not all. They are mostly doing what they are meant to be doing.

So my problem is: What on earth can these questions be like if they can be completed with so little consideration? Any question that can be answered in such an instantaneous fashion is not worth asking. This is mere recall – a knee-jerk response; we are not probing real thinking at all with questions like these. This is why examination booklets have grown so large. To occupy candidates for an hour or two with this sort of material, the examiners really have to get busy, producing pages and pages of little questions. In many subjects, it seems that when the candidates hand in their scripts at the end, the majority of the words in the booklets they are handing in were there already, and they have been more or less filling in the gaps. (Incidentally, the more printed content there is, the more potential for errors; hence the embarrassingly large number of errata that sometimes need to be read out at the start!)

This year, a few high-flying sixth form students at our school sat the British Mathematical Olympiad paper – a demanding three-and-a-half hour examination, requiring full written solutions to very challenging problems. A colleague who had been invigilating part of this examination was consequently a few minutes late to her Year 9 class, and explained when she arrived that she had been with some sixth formers who were doing a three-and-a-half hour mathematics examination. The pupils were astounded that such a thing was possible, but their amazement was mainly at how unimaginably thick must be a paper that could occupy such clever people for so long! In fact, the entire examination consists of six questions, typed onto one side of an A5 piece of paper.

We need to get back to examination styles that allow pupils time to *think* about questions that are worth thinking about. Teachers know that quick-fire question-and-answer sessions in the classroom are very limited in what they can achieve or reveal. The same is true in the examination room. Short closed questions are, of course, easy to ask, answer and – crucially – mark. But do we want to turn out young people who can only deal with one thought at a time and are never pushed to think about anything for more than a few seconds? The examination paper keeps up a constant stream of gabble, with the poor candidate having to fight for an opportunity to get a word in edgeways and show what they understand and can do. A better examination system would create space to let candidates express themselves and would give the examiner far more useful data with which to make a judgement of their capability.

Colin Foster teaches at a secondary school in Coventry.