My first exam didn't go so well!

Students: "I thought I knew the material."
"I really did study."
"I didn't understand your questions."

Faculty: "Ugh… a lot of students failed my first exam!
"My office hours are booked with upset students."
"Now, what can I do?"

It's that time in the semester! Faculty and students are often surprised by the results of their first course exams. Faculty may feel that they have clearly communicated expectations, explained important concepts, and provided early formative feedback. Students report they are indeed studying but don't seem to be learning. During the past week, I've met with numerous students to review their first exam which was a multiple choice, in-class, online exam. I also co-led a face-to-face exam review session. Unfortunately, this is not a new scenario but one that keeps repeating each semester. Can you relate?

I'm forced to ponder several questions as I examine my exam results. From a teaching standpoint, did I adequately explain the important concepts, engage the students with active learning activities, and provide relevant real life examples? Were the homework assignments realistic? Was my assessment (exam) compatible with the knowledge and skills I expect from my students? For example, if I expect application and analysis performance on exams, did I provide similar practice activities prior to the exam? Did the exam reflect my learning objectives? Are the exam items and answer choices well constructed and clearly written? For additional information on developing assessment methods and reviewing results clink on the link below to the Educational Teaching Service resource.

When I meet with students, I try not to assume poor exam scores were the result insufficient or ineffective studying. I do ask them to reflect on what they think happened. Some students report spending many hours studying but didn't really understand the concepts or were unable to recall key material during the exam. Other students will admit they should have studied more or tried to use the recommended course resources. However, for some students other reasons for their performance could include fatigue, anxiety, and/or poor test-taking skills. For tips to help students when reviewing a completed test, see the tools available on the Duquesne University Center for Teaching Excellence (2019) website.

Duquesne University Center for Teaching Excellence. (2019). Help students to learn from returned tests. Retrieved September 26, 2019, from https://www.duq.edu/about/centers-and-institutes/center-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-and-learning/exam-wrappers

Educational Teaching Service (2002). *Linking classroom assessment to student learning*. www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL_Institutional_Testing_Program/ELLM2002.pdf