

How to do better in CS Exams

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I write this with the caption – how to do better in CS exams, but in fact, the write up applies to just about every exam. It is only that I have specifically targeted it to students of company secretaryship – hence, the title.

Study for knowledge, not for exams:

Over the last over 25 years as a member, I have been very actively associated with the academic activities of the ICSI, and hence, I have been interacting with loads of students. I have not missed a single SMTP program – I have been lecturing at all of them – starting from the very first one. In addition, I have interacted with students as many of them come to us for management training.

I say all this to make a point that I have been close witness to how and what students are, particularly soon after they pass their exams. I would not even dilute words when I say that the quality of students, lately coming out of CS exams, has deteriorated immensely. It probably has to do with the examination pattern of the Institute, and perhaps the liberal view the Institute may knowingly or unknowingly be taking towards the pass percentage. The idea surely cannot be to restrain pass percentage, but surely enough, if students passing CS exams are nearly completely blank on the very basic conceptual foundations of Companies Act, then there is something surely to be seriously attended to. Out of the many many instances of students passing out with no bad marks in their exams, but found blank, I can at least recall two. First one is an example I very commonly give. If I ask 100 CS students who have passed out exams to draft a petition to the CLB, my conviction is that 80% of them draft out a petition “Before the CLB, Northern Region Bench”, though I am sitting asking this in Kolkata, which is in the Eastern Region. Why? Because the study materials probably have a draft petition apparently made to the Northern Region Bench. This is not the end of it – several students will write name of Petitioners as A Shah and B Shah, which are perhaps the names given in the draft petition.

My second example is a girl who I recently interviewed. She had obtained a good rank in her finals, and I felt so bad when she spelt Companies Act as Company’s Act. I said to myself – if a student of CS, whose core are is the company law, does not even know how to spell Companies Act correctly, and yet manages to score a rank, the inescapable conclusion is that there is something very wrong with the examinations.

My conviction becomes only stronger when I find that students are fed with capsules of notes by tutors, which they mug up, write in the exams, and pass out. They may not understand any part of what they are writing, but that seemingly does not matter for the exams.

While the mission of the Institute changing its exam patterns may be a long one, if you are a student, you must personally ensure that you are studying not for the exams but for

learning. Be sure of this – if you are studying for the exams, you may pass it, but what about life thereafter? That the real exam, and in that one, the capsules fed by tutors don't work at all. On the contrary, studying for knowledge does not mean you are risking the exams. In fact, you can trust me when I say this because I have not badly in my exams at all. Exams come as a spin off if you gained knowledge in your studies. It is like- you are sowing wheat, you get the hay as a side product.

Four steps in learning:

Once you ensure that you are learning for knowledge and not for exams, this is how you learn. There are 4 steps to learning. I don't say every time you learn anything at all, you break it down into these 4 steps and sequentially go through each of them. It just becomes a habit. What you need to understand is that each of these is important for good learning.

First is Reception of learning. Reception comes by reading or listening. Needless to say, if I listening to a lecture on company law, but mind is lost in what is cooking up at home, the knowledge enters the senses but not the mind. Sensory reception, in order to be meaningful, has to have mind attached to it. This is such a commonplace saying that I don't have to stress much on it. So, step 1 is active, mindful reception of knowledge.

Step 2 is less commonly talked about, but I feel it is very important for learning. That is Inquisition. Don't take knowledge as it comes. Put a question. Put all wh questions before you allow the knowledge to pass down to step 3. For instance, at very basic level, if someone says, the features of a company are artificial legal entity, limited liability, perpetual succession, and common seal, put questions to each of these. Why would you call it artificial? Why would you call it a legal entity? Is it legal as opposed to illegal, or legal as opposed to non-existent? Why do we say limited liability is a feature of companies, even though we know companies may have unlimited liability too. What exactly does limited liability mean? How does it matter to the stakeholders when the liability is unlimited? Why should a company have a common seal? And why it called a "common" seal though every company has a distinctive seal of its own? And so on.

Essence is, fire as many question in your mind before you allow any questions to pass. Some questions – you will be able to explore answers yourself. Others, you can check around, and if you have some guides around you, you can check with them. Most seniors would not mind answering students' brainy questions.

Step 3 is a conclusion of step 2. Meaning, after all possible enquiries, you receive a conceptually clear, transparent knowledge, that goes into your learning.

Step 4 is extremely important. As students, you need to retrieve knowledge from out of memory. Einstein's famous quote is that he does not have to know it all – he just needs to know where to find it if needed. But unfortunately, that does not work for students. Knowing sources of information is not enough – you need to know, and store it and retrieve it all from one source – that is your mind. So, step 4 ensures that you keep a very healthy and spacious memory, and are able to retrieve things from there when needed.

Strong and spacious memory:

It is my firm and self-learned conviction that memory, like lots of other organs of human body, becomes strong as you regularly use it. It is like flexing muscles. If you are the gym or doing exercises regularly, your muscles become strong. If you quit it for days, muscles start weakening again. Hence, the more you use your memory, the sharper and stronger it will become. Technology available today is anti-memory. As it has minimized physical exertion, forcing us to use the gym for workouts while we use the lift to walk upstairs, it has minimized the need for memory also. People hardly remember phone numbers, as they are stored in the cell phone. Likewise, appointments, anniversaries and what not need not be stored in the brain as they are stored in the handset. Unfortunately, there is no gym that makes up for the lack of use of brain that gets tremendous spare capacity. If, as students, it is important for you to memorize, then you need to memorize regularly. If you memorize stuff for 5 days regularly, sixth day you will surely notice your ability to memorize has gone up considerably. This is my firm conviction, and I am sure those who try this will surely agree.

Memory always needs an association, an order – something to relate things to. For instance, poems are far easier to remember than prose. That explains why most ancient religious text was written in poetry format, because it used to be passed on for generations without any paper. In poetry, words have a natural association, rhythm. How do we use the same while memorizing, for instance, provisions of law? This is, again, my self-learned experience. For remembering provisions of law, there is no better way than to memorize the sections serially. For example, I am serious about Companies Act. If I would have by and large read what the sections contain, and I need to memorize which section contains what, then the best thing is to open the contents page of the law and remember sections serially. Everyone knows section 2 generally contains definitions. So, I will start with section 3, section 4 and so on. If I am able to remember up to section 25 in one day, it would not be difficult to memorize the whole of the Act in a few weeks. Believe me, as you start doing this, you will find that not only your brain power would increase at exponential pace, your conceptual clarity would have also gone up, as you would get to understand the natural flow of the sections.

One of the most important things with memory is reiteration. You need to continuously revise things stored in memory. During the day, all of us get plenty of occasions when we can revise things stored in memory. For example, you traveling in a bus or taxi – you have nothing else to do. Just close your eyes and revise the sections. Of course, you will be sensible enough not to do it while self-driving! Quite often, people say- early mornings are best to memorize things, or just before sleeping is the best time, etc. I don't have reasons to disagree with these views, but I believe whenever it is most convenient for you to revise things in memory, that is the best time. When you don't have better things to do.

If, having read this article, there is change in the way you study or perceive studies, I will be happy if you shoot an email to vinod@vinodkothari.com