

James Elwick

Making a Grade: Victorian Examinations and the Rise of Standardized Testing

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As researchers in educational measurement and assessment, James Elwick's book *Making a Grade: Victorian Examinations and the Rise of Standardized Testing* is a historical reminder of examinations as an essential part of our educational system interacting with teaching and learning (including cramming) on a global scale. The book explores the examinations, the examiners, and the examinees—the three major components and stakeholders in the science of examinations, which Elwick calls the making of a grade. Delving into the book further, we have realized that Elwick discusses the making of a test score rather than a grade derived from teachers' classroom assessment in the current terminology in educational measurement and assessment. The wrestling of terms is how we make meaning in our existence. Research on grading has a long history in education. Early educators were primarily concerned with the reliability and standardization of teachers' grading practices in a similar manner as the *Victorian Examinations* discussed in this book. Recent research has, however, shifted to explore factors influencing teachers' grading practices related to both achievement and non-achievement. Teachers work hard to be fair to their students as they juggle their dual roles in grading of judge and coach. Being a coach is not a function directly addressed in Victorian examinations.

Elwick focuses on part of the Victorian era, from 1850 to 1900, to discuss the science of examinations and the revolution of examinations. The book features nine chapters and three sections of examinations, examiners, and examinees to outline critical issues concerning three major components and stakeholders within any standardized testing. Part 1 introduces the boom of Victorian examinations across the British Isles and British Empire. In this section, Elwick reveals when, how, and why Victorian examinations, governed by education policy, were created as a sufficient tool to assess not only students' learning but also teachers' teaching. Part 2 discusses the creation and development of examinations from the examiners' (i.e., test developers') perspectives. This section demonstrates the transition from oral to paper examinations, the stages of examination standardization, and modification of standards and decision-making to achieve fit-for-purpose testing. Part 3 explains the classification of examinees (test-takers) and how they respond to the examinations. From a historical point of view, this part documents how examinees changed their behaviors through cramming under the guidance of test-related classroom education, publications, tactics sharing, and private coaching systems. This practice remains dominant in our current education globally. Elwick acknowledges how cramming could lead to negative consequences such as passive learning (e.g., narrowed content, passive motivation, and unitary approaches) and score manipulation. Elwick further highlights how changing attitudes and examination administration could potentially reverse such consequences or even promote testing equity, which we feel has implications to the current examination and testing practice.

Making a Grade makes an important contribution to the world of science and educational assessment research. Elwick's thorough review of Victorian examinations helps to historicize key stakeholders' perspectives in the science of measurement (i.e., standardized testing) in recent educational history. This book demonstrates how examinations initially appeared as the lens to record achievement and gradually became an engine to level education. The significant influence of examinations on the education systems and their associated stakeholders is clearly illustrated. Readers can situate the examination practices in a broader historical and social context to understand the critical issues raised in this book and the implication for contemporary practice.

As researchers in educational measurement and assessment, we see this book as an informative resource for readers to learn about examination (assessment and testing) development. For example, the important dates of major examinations in Appendix A, and Biographical List in Appendix B are a refreshing creation that supports researchers doing their own research. This overview of the examination history provides an important account for assessment scholars to conceptualize and conduct their examination practices. The art of how to create a successful examination described in this book sheds light on current assessment design and implementation. Another highlight of this book comes from the inclusion of the examinee's perspectives in context. Examinees, the stakeholder group that directly bears most testing consequences, are critical in shaping a test's consequential validity. The inclusion of examinees in this book provides readers with a holistic picture of how test-takers navigate their resources to achieve the target results (a test score or a grade) and its potential impacts on their lives. Examinees' responses to the examinations and test impacts are unfolded through unique test preparation stories, allowing readers to situate themselves within the context and understand the consequences of the Victorian examinations.

The implication of this book goes beyond the history of science examinations to the history of education. Examinations, as illustrated in this work, serve as a tool to measure not only learning outcomes but also someone's merit to fit into educational institutions and professional positions. The concept of merit in these Victorian examinations was formed against the cultural and moral assumptions of a complex system, including school, school district, and broader social community. This provides historical evidence that education and standardized testing represent a complex social activity deeply rooted in the context.

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