

Critical Thinking in
Criminal Justice:
Multiple Choice or
Multiple Points for
Confusion?

Ginger R. Robinson, JD

Montgomery College

Scholarship of Excellence in Teaching Fellowship, AY 2021

The Problem and The Goal

• The Problem

- Students struggle to apply the law to hypothetical fact patterns.
- Grades on Applied Practices, SP 2020:
 - #1 – 52%
 - #2 – 54%
 - #3 – 63%

• The Goal

- To produce 21st century police officers who possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities to exercise discretion in a Constitutional and just manner.

The Strategy

- Provide students with a written opportunity to explain the multiple choice answers they selected.
- Why? Based on classroom discussion, I sensed that their assignment scores underrepresented their knowledge.

Getting Students to Bite

- Explanations were optional, and not all students provided them.
- To motivate greater effort, I consistently shared data regarding score improvement.
- I communicated how committed I was to their success.
- For some students, the encouragement wasn't enough.
- The solution: **Require explanations in future semesters.**

Creating Wicked Students

- My strategy relied primarily on Paul Handstedt's discussion of multiple choice exams in *Creating Wicked Students: Designing Courses for a Complex World*.
 - **Variation 4: Ambiguity Followed by an Explanation, pp. 96-97:**
 - "...it's not unusual for instructors writing exams to accidentally create two options that are feasibly correct. Blumberg proposes allowing students to justify their "wrong" answers by citing references and explaining their own logic...This is an excellent approach; perhaps we might even write it into the exam itself..."
 - This could be provided by a second set of multiple choice justifications or an opportunity to provide a written explanation. I selected the latter.
- Secondary shout-out: *Student Engagement Techniques* by Elizabeth F. Barkley and Claire H. Major

The Results

Spring 2021

- Exercise #1
 - 52%
- Exercise #2
 - 54%
- Exercise #3
 - 63%

Fall 2021

- Exercise #1
 - 73%
- Exercise #2
 - 83%
- Exercise #3
 - 72%

Exam 2, Fall 2021 grades (following Exercise #2): A – 17, B – 9, C – 1, D – 2

Moving Forward

KEEP

- The written explanations worked amazingly well.
 - Students demonstrated the extent of their knowledge.
 - I had the opportunity to correct, clarify, or supplement as necessary.

KICK

- Optional Explanations
 - Because the students who provided explanations achieved higher than their classmates, I'll require explanations moving forward.

What I Learned about My Teaching

- My questions are good—for law students
- I've forgotten who I was and what I knew at 19
 - I wasn't renting rooms at the Waldorf Astoria—and maybe not even Best Western

Mike rented a hotel room for five days. During the course of his stay, housekeeping entered the room daily for turn-down service and general cleaning. One night as the staffperson placed a chocolate on his pillow, he noticed the protruding barrel of a handgun. The hotel called the police, who arrived, confiscated the gun, and arrested Mike.

Which of the following statements is correct?

- a. Because Mike invited the housekeeping staff into his hotel room, he waived his expectation of privacy. Therefore, anything recovered may be used at trial.
- b. Because Mike was an overnight guest of the hotel, he had a reasonable expectation of privacy over the contents of his room. Accordingly, the hotel staff may be sued for contacting the police and violating his privacy rights.
- c. Patrons of hotels have no reasonable expectation of privacy in their rooms. Therefore, the actions of the staff were lawful, and any evidence recovered may be used at trial.
- d. Because Mike was an overnight guest of the hotel, he had a reasonable expectation of privacy over the contents of his room. Accordingly, the police were not permitted to search the room without first receiving a search warrant, and anything recovered will be suppressed.

What I Learned about My Students

- They're bright, capable, curious 21st-century criminal justice students
- They just need a little nudge
- They're tired and busy and might take shortcuts, so structure and clear expectations are important
- Their life experiences impact their ability to apply discipline content

Final Thoughts: Before and After



[This Photo](#) by Unknown Author is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

