SHU | Center for Faculty Development

“Alternative Assessment Strategies,” 1/30/2019

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**Oral Exams**

Mechanism:

* Three pre-distributed questions corresponding to the three primary content-area learning outcomes for the course (in the case of Honors 2103, a question about competing conceptions of human nature, a question about changing epistemological models, and a question about interaction between Christian Europe and non-Christian cultures).
* Each question asks students to refer to three or more specific writers or texts on the syllabus.
* Students choose what answer they want to address first (so they can prepare a script to start, which calms them down), and then we interrupt after a while, usually after they’ve calmed, to ask for more specificity, pose a counterargument, ask for another example or reference, or move them to another question.
* They each get 15 minutes; we schedule them in 20-minute slots.

Helpful Implementation Strategies:

* Playing devil’s advocate makes the exam into a conversation, rather than a speech, and prompts students to defend their claims
* Ask why students choose to answer with reference to certain texts instead of others
* Ask about readings and writings from on the syllabus but not identified in the questions (we announce ahead that doing so is fair game);
* If they cannot answer any given question, make it a teaching moment: coach them how to answer questions when they do not have answers for the specific content (I don’t know about Bacon, but Montaigne x, y, or z …). The idea is to test their depth of knowledge but also to teach them how to do well in interviews, conversations, and presentations
* Ask students how their answers might apply to their current experience as students, family members, citizens, job applicants, etc., as applicable. This oral exam forum is great for prompting students to apply their learning from the course to the “real world” or their lives in ways that other formal assignments might not
* Get the last word: comments and corrections will actually be heard, unlike paper or exam (ha!!!) comments, so don’t let them leave with an inaccurate explanation of this or that. It is an extra one-on-one lesson.
* Students get very anxious because most haven’t done this kind of thing before. Tell them well in advance; tell them how you would prepare for it; tell them about your graduate defense and orals; balance it with plenty of traditional assessment instruments (in honors, we give three essays and three exams and a quiz every day, so the final is balanced by plenty of more familiar assignments)

Benefits:

* Easy to see through BS to determine how well (or not) students know content, which written test answers might muddle (if you need more specificity, you can ask for it; if you are not sure what they mean, you can ask them to clarify). You get an infinitely clearer picture of who knows what and how well than from a paper exam.
* They actually hear the comments
* They get experience and coaching with, in many cases, what really matters: the ability to use the techniques and knowledge they have learned in real time conversation. Again, good for interviews, cocktail parties, presentations, etc.
* A nice counterbalance to all the papers and paper exams you have to grade at end of semester; and a nice counterbalance for the students who are better talkers than they are writers or test-takers
* Again, they do not leave with that lingering, nagging, embarrassing misunderstanding of this or that concept
* You can incorporate assessment of the course (you really discover what they have learned and what they haven’t learned; and in having all these conversations you will inevitably make your own new connections and ideas about the course material);
* You can use the moment to comment on other aspects of the student’s performance and to make a last (of the semester) meaningful personal connection with the student that encourages them to come back to see you for future help, advisement, courses, and so on. It is impactful.

Challenges:

* Some observers have claimed consistency is a challenge, because written exams are all the same whereas oral exams vary in difficulty based on the performance of the student and instructor, but I find 1) grading written exams is no different (you have to apply consistent standards to written answers, too) and 2) being able to adjust difficulty reduces student anxiety and gets a much more accurate sense of what they know.
* It does eat up a lot of time sitting in your office, but perhaps no more than through grading of essays properly.
* You have to grade the performance on the spot, and it is somehow more awkward giving a “bad” grade than through the usual mediums. A simple rubric might be useful, for some, but I do not confine myself with one because I think successful performances vary greatly in form.
* You will find yourself asking the same follow-up questions and making similar comments and therefore getting bored, because the students will study together and answer similarly (save yourself this grief by generating several different ideas ahead of time for how you’ll spice up different kinds of answers)
* Again, they get stressed because it is different, and however warm and fuzzy we are, we can seem intimidating
* Shy students will balk (well, the gregarious students balk at written work)