

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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I'd like to use essay tests, but...

Marilla Svinicki, *University of Texas at Austin*

Essay question: Discuss the importance of the nature/nurture controversy in the shaping of current developmental theory.
Student answer: The nature/nurture (sic) controversy was very impotent (sic) in shaping current developmental theory becuse (sic) it was needed to help people who were doing work in that area to come up with their current theories.....(Huh?)

Do you cringe when you read the kind of tortured prose and fractured thinking that is represented by the above example? Or plow through paragraph after paragraph of detail in a student's answer in hopes of finding an original thought somewhere in the pile? Or find yourself subconsciously reading more into an answer than is really there as you try to interpret the meaning of a student's essay?

Most instructors who venture into using essay tests will experience one or more of these phenomena somewhere along the line. It has been our habit in the past to blame the students, the school system and the English department for not teaching our students how to write a solidly argued, concisely worded essay answer, but we must face the fact that we are as much to blame for their imprecise prose as those other entities. The "Writing Across the Curriculum" movement of several years ago urged instructors in all departments to help their students learn to write more coherent prose, whether it be in papers or essay tests, not just to improve student writing but to encourage more complex thinking. Having to explain an answer in prose format requires more from the student in the way of deep processing of the material than is usually the case on objectively

scorable exam questions.

Many instructors across campus subscribed to these ideas enthusiastically, but were stymied when it came to putting them into practice in their classes. They increased the use of essay questions, but didn't know how to help their students improve other than exhorting them to do better.

Part of the problem may lie in the way instructors help (or fail to help) students prepare for writing essay tests. Learning specialists have known for a long time that the kind of preparation needed for responding to essay questions is different from that needed for objective tests. Unfortunately, many of our students are unaware of that difference. They prepare for all exams with the same learning strategies, and then are ill-equipped to tackle the kind of thinking needed during essay tests. In fact, they may be surprised to learn that they might need to actually think through and construct an answer for a test rather than being able to quickly search their memory for an already extant answer which can then be simply spewed out on the test. If we want the students to be able to deal with the complex nature of essay tests and other forms of spontaneous writing, there are some things we can do in our instruction that will prepare them more adequately. The following list of suggestions is by no means exhaustive, but it should serve as a stimulus for your own thinking about how your students might best prepare for your tests.

*Help them **think** differently about the material.*

Students are conditioned from an early age to think in terms of discrete facts and "correct" answers rather than looking for the relationships which are characteristic of essay answers. One of the first steps toward improved essay answers is to adopt a different perspective on the nature of what is to be learned from the material presented and read. To help students think about the material differently, the instructor can:

a. encourage them to integrate material from class to class and unit to unit. For example, you can give them a set of integrative questions to ask themselves each time they begin a new topic, questions like

*How does this topic compare with/relate to what has gone before?
How is it different? How is it similar?
Why is it included in the course? Why at this point?
What are its main points, its strengths, its weaknesses?
How does it apply to the overall goal of the course?*

- b. have them write their own sample essay questions for each lecture or reading assignment and then in class, discuss those that most closely parallel what you would ask.
- c. explain the levels of cognitive complexity (such as Bloom's taxonomy) which might be expected of them in the course and differentiate between knowledge of facts and ability to analyze and critique material.
- d. emphasize process during classtime itself, so that the students begin to understand how conclusions are reached rather than focusing on the conclusions alone.

*Help them **study** the material differently.*

Studying for essay exams is much different from studying for objectively-scorable exams. Instructors should encourage students to:

- a. create outlines of readings and lecture notes which emphasize the relationships among the ideas.
- b. draw concept maps, which are visual diagrams of how terms, principles, and ideas interconnect.
- c. paraphrase or create an executive summary for each reading or lecture.

*Help them **write** structurally sound answers.*

To help students compile the information they have learned into answers which are written more effectively and efficiently, an instructor can:

- a. provide a list of key words used in essay questions and what they imply in terms of answer content and structure.
- b. give students opportunities to practice writing essay answers in

class and discussing the structure of the answers.

c. assign brief out-of-class essay questions with which to practice and provide individual feedback on the writing. You may wish to develop a feedback phrase sheet, which lists your most commonly used comments and an extended description of what that comment means. Then the feedback on the answer itself can be written using the key phrase instead of the entire comment. (To get really efficient, just use a set of numbered phrases.)

d. give the students an opportunity to grade an essay answer using the system you normally use so that they will understand how they are being evaluated.

e. provide examples of good and poor answers to essay questions with an explanation of why they are evaluated that way.

f. show students how to use algorithms for answering typical question types. For example, a prototype answer for a "compare and contrast" item might always include two points of similarity between the two concepts and two points of difference. Help them develop generic outlines or concepts maps for common types of questions into which they can plug the specifics of the topic.

g. help them learn time management techniques for essay writing. For example, scanning all the items and parceling out an appropriate amount of time to spend on each according to weight or importance; spending a few minutes outlining an answer before writing, possibly even giving some credit in grading for content which appears on an outline, but was not included in the answer due to time constraints; having a checklist for quickly evaluating answers before completing the exam (such as "did you answer the question?" "are the transitions clear?" "is evidence provided for each assertion?" and so on).

Why should we bother?

There is actually an additional selfish motive for improving students' essay writing skills: it makes the grading process much easier.

When students learn how to read an essay question and from the structure of the question, select an answer protocol that insures that all parts of the answer are present and well-organized, the task of grading those answers becomes less one of interpretation and more one of evaluation.

When students can write well-argued essays in clear and concise prose, it actually can be a pleasure to grade their work. It certainly will take less time and mental effort. In the long run both parties benefit.

Unfortunately there is no guarantee that all students will be able to use these strategies to improve their essay writing, but at least they would be aware that integrative essay questions require a different type of preparation than they may have used in the past. That awareness may be the first step on the developmental path to the higher-level thinking characteristic of college level work.