Writing Tests for Rhetoric-Level Students

by Stephen Rippon

The purpose of this article is to promote discussion about how we can write tests that better reflect our values in classical education. In particular, I encourage rhetoric-level teachers who have been relying on recognition and memorization to include more essays in designing their tests—not only in literature and history, but in all subjects.

Teachers have long recognized the value of tests. As German Reformer Philip Melanchthon wrote in *De Studiis Adolescentum* (1529), "No academical exercise can be more useful than that of Examination. It whets the desire of learning, it enhances the solicitude of study, while it animates the attention to whatever is taught."[1] In their survey of the history of educational measurement, Madaus and O'Dwyer quote Melanchthon to show that educators still recognize the importance of testing, even though the nature of testing has changed over the last two centuries. As modern schools moved toward a "factory model," exams changed from oral to written, from qualitative to quantitative, and from short answer to multiple choice.[2] More recently, in the postmodern period, many educators have rejected multiple-choice tests for various reasons, so that there is no longer a consensus on how to test—nor, for that matter, *what* to test.[3]

While many postmodern educators critique multiple-choice tests for their racial and cultural ideology, cultural historian Jacques Barzun critiques them as poor pedagogy. In his 1991 book *Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning*, Barzun identifies the widespread use of multiple-choice tests and its variants—filling in words, rearranging items, matching diagrams, choosing summary statements, telling true-false, or the simple identifying of names and terms—as methods that are "peculiar to our century."[4]

Like everything else we do in our schools, our tests—unlike the Scantron forms of modernity—should encourage students to love the order, coherence, and beauty of God's world.

What's wrong with these modern, more efficient testing methods? "Mechanical testing," as Barzun calls it, "tests nothing but recognition knowledge."[5] He gives an example: "It is one thing to pick out Valley Forge and not Albany or Little Rock as the place where Washington made his winter quarters; it is another, first, to think of Valley Forge and then to say why he chose it instead of Philadelphia, where it was warmer."[6] Barzun suggests that mechanical tests may be used as quizzes that test whether a reading assignment was done—but certainly not as any significant grade.[7]

In addition to relying too much on mere recognition of information, another mistake rhetoric-level teachers are prone to make in designing tests comes to our attention through John Milton Gregory. His 1884 book *The Seven Laws of Teaching* includes "The Law of the Learning Process": "The learner must reproduce in his own mind the truth to be acquired."[8] Gregory explains, "As that is not true teaching which simply pours out before the pupil the treasures of the teacher's knowledge, so that is not true learning which merely memorizes and repeats the teacher's words and ideas."[9]

Perhaps we are especially prone to violating "The Law of the Learning Process" in classical schools, where we value memorization of facts as the grammar of every discipline. The problem arises when we stop with memorization. In his own day, Gregory identified some common mistakes, such as how "college students have been known to learn the demonstrations of geometry by heart, and never to suspect any meaning in them."[10]

Because multiple-choice-type tests reward recognition of pieces of knowledge apart from their original context, and because mere memory exercises likewise do not challenge students to understand the relationship among and significance of the facts, I encourage teachers—especially at the rhetoric level—to use more essay tests.

Essay tests have great benefits for students. The prospect of an essay test motivates students to attain a thorough understanding and not a mere recall of facts. In her book *Tools for Teaching*, Barbara Gross Davis cites three different studies which report that "students study in ways that reflect how they think they

Stephen Rippon, *MDiv, teaches at Tall Oaks Classical School in Newark, DE. Learn more about Tall Oaks at http://www.talloaksclassicalschool.org/site09/index.html.*

Writing Tests for Rhetoric-Level Students...

will be tested. If they expect an exam focused on facts, they will memorize details; if they expect a test that will require problem solving or integrating knowledge, they will work toward understanding and applying information."[11] In classical education, we do not create an either/or dilemma between facts and problem solving. Well-designed essay tests presuppose that a student has learned the facts, but they also give the student opportunity and motivation to show an understanding of how to apply those facts.

Good teachers use essay tests to help students make connections and applications—to help them see the big picture. Jason Saxon Smith, who teaches at Providence Christian School in Dothan, Alabama, explains his approach to testing his students on the *Iliad*. In addition to having students show a knowledge of key information and themes in Homer's epic, Smith encourages them to "pull the lens back" and ask, " 'So what?' . . . '*What is Homer suggesting about life and culture through his treatment of these themes?*' I want the kids, in their evaluations, to be doing some evaluation of their own . . . They need to be adopting the attitude of a literary and cultural critic."

What are some examples of essay questions that encourage rhetoric-level students to express original ways of understanding and applying what they have learned? Here is a sample from my test on *Paradise Lost* for our eleventh and twelfth grade Advanced Literature class. After a section of closed-book quote identification worth twenty percent of the overall grade—the purpose of which is to encourage students to be more sensitive to language, so that they can distinguish Milton's Adam from Milton's Eve, and Satan from the Son of God—the test includes these instructions: "Part 2: Short essays (3 paragraphs, about a page in length; 40 points each; suggested time: 20 minutes each). Each essay should have a clear thesis, logical organization, and a well-informed interpretation of the text with support from at least two relevant direct quotations.

"1. In his *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis writes, 'Eve fell through pride . . . . Adam fell by uxoriousness.' Based on your reading of the text and class discussions, is Lewis' summary correct?

"2. The romantic poet William Blake wrote, 'The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.' Was Milton 'of the Devil's party without knowing it'? Can you provide another plausible explanation for Blake's observation, based on your reading of the text and class discussions?"

My essay tests are usually open-book and open-notes, rewarding students who have being reading and marking their texts all along—or, if they are not allowed to keep their books, making notes directing them to relevant passages in the text. Also, I include specific instructions about essay length, structure, and other criteria.

Admittedly, writing and grading these essay tests takes time and practice; it is, as Barzun notes, a "lost art."[12] I am constantly refining my tests. I used to offer three essay prompts, asking students to choose only one or two of them to write—but after considering Davis' advice in *Tools for Teaching*, I decided that offering students too many essay topics to choose from has some negative effects: students begin to assume they need to study only part of the required material, and then they may use too much time during the test deciding which topic to write on.[13]

We may see how essay tests are good for literature and history courses—but what about math and science? Our science teacher at Tall Oaks Classical School, Mrs. Rebecca Trudeau, expresses the difficulty: "Often sciences are taught solely at the grammar level (biology courses, in particular, tend to focus primarily on naming parts and describing how they work.)" Still, Trudeau looks for opportunities to integrate writing into her tests. She provides a sample test question: "How do members of the phylum Chrysophyta differ from members of the phylum Pyrrophyta? How are they alike? (You should include at least three ways they differ and at least three ways they are alike.) You must use technical language."

Moreover, immediately following the tests on each of the five kingdoms in biology, Trudeau has the students complete a "rhetoric question," writing an essay on an organism in that kingdom which they did not specifically cover, yet applying concepts and terminology that they learned. That writing component becomes part of a larger test-event in keeping with the ideal of John Milton Gregory when he writes, "There is a still higher and more fruitful stage in learning. It is found in the study of the uses and applications of knowledge. No

Writing Tests for Rhetoric-Level Students...

lesson is learned to its full and rich ending till it is traced to its connections with the great working machinery of nature and of life."[14]

Math teachers can apply Gregory's principles as well. Mrs. Christina Schneider of Tall Oaks applies "The Law of the Learner" in her calculus and physics classes: "We find nice 'short-cuts' and methods for 'taking the derivative,' but it's very important for students to have a conceptual understanding of what a derivative really represents, and so asking them to explain that in their own words is a good indicator of their level of understanding." Schneider explains, "In math in general, we've been trying to encourage our students to think of problem solving in terms of essay writing. I'm not just interested in the answer to the problem, but how they arrived at that answer: the solution. A solution is a step-by-step listing of the process of solving a problem. It tells a story; it's an explanation. This is beyond just giving an answer."

When students understand problem-solving in math in terms of essay writing, and come to see a solution as a story, they are making connections between disciplines in ways that are rare for our fragmented age. Some of my most gratifying moments as a teacher have been after essay exams when students said, "Thank you for that test. It was fun. It helped me put things together in a way I hadn't thought of before." Like everything else we do in our schools, our tests—unlike the Scantron forms of modernity—should encourage students to love the order, coherence, and beauty of God's world.

ENDNOTES

1. Cited in George F. Madaus and Laura M. O'Dwyer, "Short History of Performance Assessment: Lessons Learned," *Phi Delta Kappan* 80.9 (1999): 688, Questia, 12 Oct. 2009, http://www.questiaschool.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5001256493.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Jacques Barzun, *Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning*, ed. Morris Philipson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 33.

5. Ibid.

6. Barzun, 34.

7. Barzun, 36.

8. John Milton Gregory, *The Seven Laws of Teaching* (Lancaster, PA: Veritas Press, 2004), 124.

9. Ibid.

10. Gregory, 134.

11. Barbara Gross Davis, *Tools for Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 239.

12. Barzun, 36.

13. Davis, 274. Her chapter on "Short-Answer and Essay Tests" has good advice on how to craft and grade essay questions.

14. Gregory, 127.

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