

Jun-1995

Education Commentary: Reading Final Exams

Barbara Apstein
Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation

Apstein, Barbara (1995). Education Commentary: Reading Final Exams. *Bridgewater Review*, 14(1), 29-30.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol14/iss1/14

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

EDUCATION COMMENTARY

Reading Final Exams

Barbara Apstein

“Done!” Everyone remembers the exhilarating sense of freedom after the last final exam. Weeks of stress and all-nighters, vast quantities of coffee consumed, arms aching from the effort of hours of furious writing — and at last, liberation. It may come as a surprise to learn that teachers (who, understandably, receive little sympathy during finals week) also experience these feelings. Struggling to meet the seventy-two hour deadline for submitting final grades, we watch the pile of blue books on the desk slowly diminish and eagerly anticipate our approaching freedom. Only twenty more! Ten more! Five more! At the end of the semester, we are the envy of our non-teaching friends, whose professional lives lack these regular interruptions, these natural points of closure and summing up. The academic cycle, with its fifteen weeks of classes, followed by final exams and a few weeks (or a summer) of time off, is unique.

Before we can fully savor our freedom, however, teachers must set our minds to the difficult work of evaluation, both of the students and of ourselves. Reading final exams forces us to take a hard look at what we have accomplished — and what we haven’t. This semi-annual self-examination is as much a part of the academic calendar as days of atonement and introspection are part of religious calendars. And, like a religion, the reading of essay exams has its rituals.

To get a preliminary sense of the range of responses, I pick up a few blue books, selecting representatives of both stronger and weaker students. I’ve tried to design the questions to elicit something beyond the regurgitating of lecture notes; the students are directed to look at stories, plays and poems in a way we haven’t discussed in class and formulate and argue an individually developed viewpoint.

Once I have gotten a “feel” for the range of answers, I fold back the cover page of each blue book so that I won’t

see the student’s name. Evaluating essays is inherently subjective, and I don’t want to be any more biased than absolutely necessary. I’ve gotten to know and like many of these students, particularly those who are enthusiastic, active participants in class discussion and I don’t want to risk being tempted to give them extra points. So I read each essay before I look at the name, and the result can be either gratifying or disappointing.

Diane, a conscientious and reliable student all semester, has misread a major essay question. I see from her opening paragraph that she’s missed the point. “Diane,” I implore, “go back, reread the question.” But it’s too late; Diane is off and running and, without glancing back, she has scribbled five irrelevant pages. Josh understood the question, but his essay reveals an abyss of misreading and misinterpretation. Checking my grade book, I note that Josh missed only two classes all semester and did fairly well on the reading quizzes. He was there, he did his work, and yet he apparently grasped very little of what was going on. Was I that unclear? Or was he daydreaming? Tired? Preoccupied with personal problems?

On the other hand, Kerry, who missed two weeks of classes because she developed mono, hasn’t missed anything intellectually. We teachers exhort students to attend class faithfully, to reread, to outline, to seek tutoring help. Hard work, we tell them, will pay off. Yet we know that many students, however determined and conscientious, simply cannot get the grades they want. We’ve heard the familiar complaint: “I stayed in and studied while my roommate went out partying, and she did twice as well as I did! It’s not fair!” The intersections of academic talent, attention and motivation remain mysterious.

Mike’s essay approaches the topic with insight and originality, and I read it with a growing sense of pleasure.

Then I reread, to ponder and digest his ideas and to reexamine a poem I have read perhaps twenty times — but never in this way. Mike rarely participated in class discussions, but he's been thinking, absorbing, and learning all semester.

"Done!" The blue books are stacked in a neat pile; the grades have been added up and recorded. The textbook can go back on the shelf, and the class notes back into the file cabinet. In the Campus Center, the students are lined up to sell their books, including, of course, the one they used in my course. What have they learned from 15 weeks of Major British Writers? Unlike other workers, teachers don't have much

that's concrete to show for their efforts: we don't earn commissions, cure diseases, win lawsuits.

W. H. Auden wrote that "poetry makes nothing happen," that is, in any external and measurable sense, and the same can be said of teaching, especially in the humanities. We have to accept the fact that, for many of our students, the "lit GER" is just another requirement, a chore to be dutifully completed on the long road to their college degree. Most of them muddle through and it's hard to know what, if anything, they come away with.

Yet in every class I've taught, there have been more than a few students like Mike, who for some reason, make

an intellectually creative connection with the poems and plays we read. Teachers don't always know who these students are. I ran into one of them purely by chance, recognizing in a supermarket aisle a young woman who'd been in my class years before. I didn't remember her name. We exchanged news — she had graduated about five years earlier. I was about to end the conversation with "nice to see you again" and move on, but she had something else to say. She hesitated. "You know," she said, "this may surprise you, but I've thought a lot about some of the books we read — Homer and Dante. It was a privilege to be introduced to them."

Barbara Apstein, Associate Editor

