

Pondering exams for literature in English

November 16, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

As I prepare a mid-term examination these days for students in a survey course in American Literature, I am quite conscious of a doubt that's been nagging at me the past three or four years. I can express this doubt loosely in the form of a question (Q hereafter): "Many, perhaps most universities offer examinations in courses for literature in the English language (American, English, and so called Western literature, and so on). Are those exams helpful for students in Taiwan?"

In the night division English Department in which I teach "American Lit," a disturbingly high percentage of my students in recent years have performed poorly in the mid-term and final exams. To put it in casual language, too many of them have crashed miserably in the exams. As a result, Qs have been dogging me, barking and snapping at my pant cuffs. Is inferior student performance in my literature exams my problem, or my students' problem? Is something drastically wrong with the way I teach this material? Are my students reading the literature or simply skimming it? Is literature in English meaningful for students in Taiwan? Do students do poorly because my tests do not match their way of reading? Is the language of the literature the problem, in this case English? Are these students simply in the wrong academic discipline?

To begin to answer these questions, I decided to invite my American Literature students this semester to participate in a simple survey on the topic of their general experience with examinations on literature that they study not in Chinese, but in English. I say "in general" because this particular group of students has never had an examination with me. I told the students the survey was voluntary and anonymous. I emphasized that when I read their responses to five simple questions, I did not want to know their names.

I then asked the students to describe the level of their interest in literature in English. Are you "very interested," "interested," "moderately interested," "not interested" or "not interested at all" in this type of literature?

I assumed beforehand that I might be surprised in how the students responded. To put it mildly, I was indeed surprised.

First, let me point out 70 students were in that classroom. Guess how many were willing to respond to the survey? Only 54 (47 female students, 7 male). Why did 16 choose to say nothing? I do not know. This note of passivity seemed ominous. Of the female students, 22 said they are not interested in reading literature in English, 20 that they are moderately interested, and 5 "very interested." Of the males, 2 termed themselves interested, 3 moderately interested, and 2 very interested. Thus, nearly 1/3 of those in the room are not interested in the course material.

I asked the students if they would read the literature in our course in more or less the same way they do now if we dropped exams entirely and used other means to measure knowledge and involvement. So, "Without exams, would you do the reading?" Of the females, 23 replied "yes," 5 "no," and 21 "not sure." Of the males in general, 5 said "yes," and 2 "no." I was especially interested in the question of fairness. I asked, "Do the grades you receive on your exams accurately reflect your knowledge of the literature and the work you invested in preparing for the tests?" Note this was not a question about fair grades for courses.

Over 2/3rd of all the women in the survey responded "no," a strong signal they consider their grades in exams for literature in English as fundamentally unfair. Among the males, 5 of 7 said the same thing. I had hoped to offer a column today that would include figures such as those above, as well as direct words from my students in this obviously non-scientific, miniscule survey. Space limits make this impossible. I hope to return to this topic and continue this conversation soon.

We need to ponder how to meet an apparent deep lack of interest in literature in English for a high percentage of our college students who are, ironically, actual English literature majors. We also need to scrutinize students' complaints that grades in their exams appear to be unfair. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. In a recent survey, many students in a literature course in English said exams were necessary to push them to read the literature in the course. "No exams" meant, for many of them, "no reading of the literature." What about you? If you had no exams in a course in literature in English, would you still do the reading? Why or why not?
2. 2 of every 3 students in the survey (involving 70 students) say the grades they receive on their exams are not fair grades. Their work for the tests and their knowledge of the course material are somehow graded against them. What is your opinion of grades you've received in exams?
3. Student remarks in the survey are mostly very negative. Are exams in literature courses in English harmful or helpfull, do you think, for Taiwan college students?

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