

Literature in English exams part 2

November 23, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

I promised to soon return to last week's topic of student reactions to a certain type of examination. I've decided that "soon" means today.

Readers unfamiliar with a very limited anecdotal survey I wrote of here last Sunday may want to review that situation by visiting the China Post website ("Pondering exams for literature in English" [11-16-14]). The anonymous survey drew 54 voluntary participants in a course in American Literature in the night division English Department of my university. The students had never taken an exam with me. They responded to their experiences in exams over several years. I asked them to declare their interest in literature in English ("interested," "not interested," and so on). I asked if they would still seriously read the literature in our course, for example, if it had no exams. Of 54 students, 29 said "yes," 7 "no," and 18 "not sure."

A whopping 2 out of 3 students felt the grades they'd gotten for exams on literature in English (not course grades) were unfair to them. Space is dear. Let's share as much room as possible with our young friends, all English majors, and all seniors (4th year).

A student from Banchiao who terms herself "actually, not very interested" in literature in English, sounds a bit upbeat. "I do not prefer to write literature exams, [but] I still learn something by it. For example, it improves my writing technique." About fairness she opines, "Every time I spend lots of time preparing for a literature exam, my grades are not bad. I am satisfied . . . [still] I hope professors focus on attendance and assignments. That's better than exams." A classmate adds, "Yeah, I think exams are fair . . . sometimes?" Another says, "Not sure about 'fair'. Sometimes I am just not good at writing, so it's unfair to me then."

The survey often reveals words laced with similar caveats. For example, "Exams help me to think more logically. Exams are made however for testing students, instead of destroying their confidence." A male classmate from New Taipei City adds, "I love reading, but not literature that appears in my textbooks. Exams destroy my 'fantasy' for literature." (Did the student mean "enjoyment"?) He

continues "I really hate literature courses . . . [Taiwan's use of exams] has ruined my interest in literature. I hate it [and] think literature is useless to me. No offense to you. I'll accept any score you give me." No one can accuse this young man of flattery here. I wonder if he is close to a female classmate who says, "Personally, literature exams just torture me. They've made me lose [my] initial purpose of enjoying my study of literature."

One student particularly questioned the value of exams. "Exams are not a good way to evaluate us because they're partly related to fortune." A classmate agrees: "Some people get very 'nervous' or 'frot' all that they memorized for an exam." A student from Xinchuang comments, "[Exams] force me to remember something that I am not interested in. To pass . . . I have to study. Afterwards, I forget almost everything."

One student distinguishes between reading and thinking. "If professors want to make students read, exams are useful. Exams are a 'useful forcing way'. If they want students to think more and give various points of view, exams are totally not useful." A student from Taipei says, "I read literature for my interest, not for exams . . . Chinese people always focus on grades, but grades can't represent everything. Enthusiasm is more important."

A female student from Taipei says "The exams give me a stomach ache. But if they are easy [under certain professors], I will love them and study more." Among the positive remarks: "Exams can push me to read literature and also help me to understand the history of England and America."

A final sample, again with a caveat: "I am not sure if exams are helpful. I have actually learned much from literature about attitudes and thoughts about life or the world and people. Literature is very close to our life. But if we want to get a job in the future, literature can't help us get hired."

I regret that space limits do not allow me to include more of my students' words. I am grateful for their contribution. Clearly there is much here for us to ponder and do something about. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. A reader of LAST WEEK's column wrote to say he was surprised that students in the survey about exams surprised me. I believe his meaning was: students may 'naturally' feel exam grades are not fair, or may not be interested, for example, in literature courses in English. Do YOU feel exams CAN BE fair to you or that some courses ARE truly good for you to take? How to be fair and what courses?
2. Looking at the student quotes in today's column, what 2 students make the deepest impression on you?
3. Perhaps most readers of this column are not professors or students. Do you feel this column will bore them?

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