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Using Knowledge Surveys and Tests to Teach Literature: Do We Assess and Make Asses of Ourselves?

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INTRODUCTION

Even before the end of the twentieth century, literature teachers were under a great deal of pressure to join the assessment movement, but recently the screws have been tightened, this time by the federal government through the six regional accrediting agencies. In fall 2006 the Department of Education published "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education." A/K/A the Spellings Report (after our Secretary of Education), this document wants, in the words of Daniel Golden, "colleges to be more accountable for—and candid about—student performance, and they have criticized accreditors as barriers to reform" (B1). With this version of No College Left Behind, we in the arts and humanities are being asked to apply a methodology from the military and business world so as to become pedagogical bean counters who can demonstrate that our students have actually learned something in our classes. Laurie Fendrich, a professor of fine arts at Hofstra, described her initial reaction to this new demand in academia

It seemed to mean simply that we could no longer base our teaching on the assumption that because we are active professionals in the art world our students would automatically learn, by some sort of osmosis, to become artists themselves. Outcomes assessment meant that we would have to figure out if our students were actually learning what we assumed they were learning, or, indeed, if they were learning anything at all. And if they weren't, we'd have to fix the problem. (B7)

Like us, Fendrich eventually became skeptical of attempts to quantify knowledge acquisition in our discipline. How, for instance, does one set up student learning outcomes—SLOs, at our university—to measure aesthetic appreciation? In our sub-discipline, is there a coefficient of creativity we can ascribe to our would-be Hemingways and Frosts? Personal feelings aside, however, at our university for the past three “assessment cycles” (once known as “semesters”), faculty were required to draw up course goals; to make certain our objectives align with those of our department, college, and even university programs; and to create key performance indicators. All of our syllabi were collected electronically to ensure compliance, and for the past year we have been undergoing accreditation by our regional agency, SACS.

Our doubts notwithstanding, this past year the two of us decided to conduct an experiment in assessing our junior-level Intro to Am Lit II class. To be precise, for the fall semester we devised and administered a knowledge survey to them; in the spring semester, at the encouragement of our Institutional Research (IR) unit, we moved from indirect to direct assessment (see how the language drips off our computer keys) by devising and administering a knowledge test. Both instruments allow us to be accountable by demonstrating to Secretary Spellings, accreditors, and ourselves that our Am Lit students have indeed learned something in our classes.

We feel duty-bound, however, to offer this caveat. In her book *Enhancing Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning*, Maryellen Weimer has shown how SOTL incorporates the extremes of personal experience and educational research. While we are much closer to the former than the latter, and regularly we need to have terms like “regression to the mean” and “standard deviation” explained to us by IR, we were, nonetheless, quite surprised by what our elementary attempt at using knowledge surveys and tests demonstrated to us.

DEFINITIONS

The early 90’s saw a paradigm shift in postsecondary pedagogy from an emphasis on the instructor teaching to that of the student learning, from the traditional classroom lecture to the active learning methodology, and from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side. Concurrent with that change came a re-imagining of classroom assessment methods. Most instructors evaluate their students’ learning through quizzes and exams, but such instruments tend to narrowly focus on a particular day

(e.g., Charlotte Perkins Gilman) or a specific unit (e.g., Realism). According to one of the experts in the field, Edward Nuhfer, the knowledge “survey consists of course learning objectives framed as questions that test mastery of particular objectives” (59). As Wirth and Perkins state, “Knowledge surveys consist of a large number of questions that cover the full content in a course.” The survey is given on the first and last day of the class, a pre- and post-test, and is not graded. Theoretically, such surveys help instructors design courses (aligning the objectives, courses methodology, and assessment tools), can cover courses in depth, enhance and judge higher-level thinking skills, and help students learn by previewing knowledge. In surveys students don’t actually answer questions, but instead rate their ability to do so on a scale of 1, 2, or 3.

Using a more traditional knowledge test as a follow-up to the knowledge survey was a suggestion made to us by Stacey Street, the Assistant Director of Assessment and Strategic Planning in our university’s Institutional Research office. She had us turn our forty-question survey into an actual comprehensive test. Whereas some knowledge surveyors use 200 or so questions, we had kept our original survey shorter to allow for the knowledge test possibility; obviously, it takes more class time to answer a test than to simply place a number in front of a question, and we allotted only one day at the beginning of the semester and one day at the end for our assessment experiment.

The survey was administered to an Am Lit II class during the Fall 2006 semester, and the knowledge test was given during the Spring 2007 semester to another 351 class. Both classes were randomly assigned to Charlie. In both cases we assured the students that the instruments would in no way affect their course grade (though we did ask them to sign their names so we could correlate pre- and post-instruments). In May 2007, after the second semester had concluded, we analyzed each class, compared the results, and found some conclusions that while not worthy of an educational journal are nonetheless quite interesting.

OUR KNOWLEDGE SURVEY

In August 2006 we created a Knowledge Survey for our Am Lit II/ENG 351 course. Essentially we examined the course syllabus to locate 40 of what Gerald Nosich has called “fundamental and powerful concepts”—i.e., the most basic ideas underlying the course (we chose forty because on a hundred-point scale each concept was worth 2.5 points); among those concepts was the scholarly note, which we define as a pub-

lishable 1500-word paper (in retrospect, we should have included more on Realism). We wrote the directions and introduced the 1-2-3 scale so that the final product looked like the following:

Name _____

ENG 351 KNOWLEDGE SURVEY

DIRECTIONS: Instead of actually answering the following questions, rate your ability to answer them using the following numbers:

1=I have insufficient knowledge to answer this question.

2=I have partial knowledge or know where to obtain a complete answer quickly (20 minutes or less without an Internet search or asking a friend).

3=I can fully answer this question with my present knowledge.

- _____ 1. Name the four periods of American Lit since Romanticism.
- _____ 2. What are four basic traits and major of the regional transition period after Romanticism?
- _____ 3. What are four major post-Romantic, 19th Century works of literary theory by then contemporary writers?
- _____ 4. What is the most basic narrative pattern, especially in fiction, found in all of American Lit?
- _____ 5. Who is the major stereotypic figure in American fiction?
- _____ 6. What are four major traits of the literary period following Howells as exemplified by London, Norris, and Dreiser?
- _____ 7. Define the two opposing poetic theories at the beginning of the 20th Century as exemplified by Frost and Pound.
- _____ 8. What are four essential characteristics of the published scholarly note?
- _____ 9. Name three journals that publish scholarly notes in American Literature?
- _____ 10. What are three most essential library sources needed to research a scholarly note?
- _____ 11. What are four major characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance, the black writers of the 60s, and non-white writers in general?
- _____ 12. In three ways how does contemporary American Literature differ from that of the 19th Century?
- _____ 13. What are three idiosyncratic traits of Southern Literature?

Note that for some questions we asked for a specific number of traits (in the knowledge survey that number was indicated by the parallel number of A's, B's, etc). During finals week we scored both the pre- and post-course survey.

RESULTS OF THE KNOWLEDGE SURVEY

One question we asked was whether our sample contained sufficient students. Because some students add a class late, some drop out, and some don't show on the final day of class, only 13 (out of 21 who eventually registered for the course) took both the pre-test and the post-test, the reason for our waiting until the end of the semester to score both survey instruments. We put the results on a chart that listed both scores as well the difference/gain between the two scores.

KNOWLEDGE SURVEY RESULTS

ENG 351

Fall 2006

STUDENT	AVERAGE DIFFERENCE	AVERAGE PRE-COURSE SCORE	AVERAGE POST-COURSE SCORE
1	+ 1.23	1.23	2.46
2	+ 1.47	1.38	2.85
3	+ .93	1.15	2.08
4	+ .76	1.62	2.38
5	+ 1.23	1.15	2.38
6	+ 1.54	1.08	2.62
7	+ .93	1.38	2.31
8	+ .84	1.54	2.38
9	+ 1.23	1.08	2.31
10	+ 1.07	1.62	2.69
11	+ 1.54	1.08	2.62
12	+ 1.07	1.62	2.69
13	+ 1.54	1.08	2.62
AVERAGE	+ 1.18	1.31	2.49

Obviously we could hand the chart to Secretary Spellings and say, "See, the students learned something in the class." We could also point out that over three and one-half months the average student gained over a full point. On the other hand, we would have to question a few items:

- ◆ What is the significance of a full point gain in the class?
- ◆ How truly representative are the forty most fundamental and powerful concepts we selected? We are not aware of a national survey to ascertain the Top 40 nor does our department (or even its Am Lit cohort) have a pre-selected list. Does the course knowledge called for truly align with all the university, college, department, and even personal course goals and student learning objectives?
- ◆ Since surveys are an indirect measure of student achievement, how accurate is the student's self-perception? We recently read a study that in college 90% of faculty rate themselves in the top 10% of instructors; if faculty have such a high view of themselves, what can we expect from a generation raised on the Lake Wobegon notion of high self-esteem?
- ◆ How did the students' knowing that the results of the instrument would not be part of their grade affect them? Did they give it the old college try, or did they just blow it off?
- ◆ How important is knowledge anyway? In this Age of Active Learning, assessment is even more concerned with what students can do (i.e., what skills they acquire) than what they know.

OUR KNOWLEDGE TEST

Before the start of the Spring 2007 semester, we converted our knowledge survey into a knowledge test. We tried to keep the latter as close as possible in format for reasons we'll discuss later.

Name _____

ENG 351 KNOWLEDGE TEST

1. Name the four periods of American Lit since Romanticism.

- | | |
|----|----|
| A. | C |
| B. | D. |

2. What are the basic traits of the regional transitional period after Romanticism?
- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| A. Trait 1: | C. Trait 3: |
| B. Trait 2: | D. Trait 4: |
3. What are four major post-Romantic, 19th Century works of literary theory by then contemporary writers?
- | | |
|----|----|
| A. | C |
| B. | D. |
4. What is the most basic narrative pattern, especially in fiction, found in all of American Lit?
5. Who is the major stereotypic figure in American fiction?
6. What are four major traits of the literary period following Howells as exemplified by London, Norris, and Dreiser?
- | | |
|----|----|
| A. | C |
| B. | D. |
7. Define the major opposing poetic theories at the beginning of the 20th Century as exemplified by Frost and Pound?
- | | |
|----|--|
| A. | |
| B. | |
8. What are four essential characteristics of the published scholarly note?
- | | |
|----|----|
| A. | C |
| B. | D. |
9. Name three journals that publish scholarly notes in American Literature?
- | | |
|----|---|
| A. | C |
| B. | |
10. What are the most essential library sources needed to research a scholarly note?
- | | |
|----|---|
| A. | C |
| B. | |
11. What are four major characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance, the black writers of the 60s, and non-white writers in general?
- | | |
|----|----|
| A. | C |
| B. | D. |
12. In what ways does contemporary American Literature differ from that of the 19th Century?
- | | |
|----|---|
| A. | C |
| B. | |

13. What is idiosyncratic about Southern Literature?

- A. C
B.

RESULTS OF THE KNOWLEDGE TEST

At the conclusion of the spring semester, we created a results chart patterned after the one for the knowledge survey. This semester we had 17 participants completing both the pre- and post-test versus 13 for the knowledge survey. We scored the test on a hundred-point scale so that with 40 questions each question was worth 2.5 points.

KNOWLEDGE TEST RESULTS ENG 351 Spring 2007

STUDENT	AVERAGE PRE-COURSE SCORE	AVERAGE POST-COURSE SCORE	AVERAGE DIFFERENCE
1	3	38	+38
2	10	48	+38
3	5	35	+30
4	0	30	+30
5	0	43	+43
6	0	60	+60
7	5	68	+63
8	3	50	+47
9	0	53	+53
10	5	33	+28
11	3	50	+53
12	0	63	+63
13	0	68	+68
14	0	48	+48
15	8	30	+22
16	3	30	+27
17	0	22	+22
AVERAGE	3	45	+42

So what did our test prove? During the semester our students seemed to learn something, enough to improve their knowledge base 42 points. As a direct measure of student knowledge, the knowledge test seemed more reliable than the knowledge survey. Of course, the results once again caused us to ask some questions:

- ◆ What is the significance of a 42-point gain? Would it prove anything to accreditors?
- ◆ How seriously did students take these tests? Did they actually try to do as well as possible to impress the professor in the week before final grades were turned in?
- ◆ Did students actually use the post-test as a “study guide” to prepare for the graded final examination?
- ◆ What does the very low average score of 45 say about student’s knowledge the week before the final examination? Was the student sense of low performance a wake-up call to study hard for finals? Was the 45 score a sure-fire indicator that a lot of cramming for the final would be done? Was the 45 score an indicator of the instructor’s performance, that he hadn’t taught them much? Was the 45 score an answer to the age-old mystery of why students don’t like comprehensive finals?

APPLES, ORANGES, AND EVEN PEACHES

We realize that trying to draw conclusions about the relationship of the knowledge survey experiment and that of the knowledge test is like the proverbial comparison between apples and oranges, especially for untrained fruit-pickers like ourselves. Nonetheless, as with the apple in the garden, we succumb to temptation.

One potential correlation jumps out at us. In the knowledge survey the average pre-course score was 1.31, which means students thought they knew something. On the other hand, in the pre-course knowledge test, the average pre-course score was 3 (out of 100), which suggests the students knew little more than their names. Why the discrepancy? Are we seeing the results of inflated self-esteem?

Another temptation is to try to correlate the post-score knowledge test average with final grades. Of course, that’s not smart on our part because we began this article by admitting class tests and exams tend to offer snapshots of student performance, not videos of the entire course.

Still, the grade distribution of the 17 students who were part of the knowledge test experiment was:

- ◆ A [90-100] =8 (44%)
- ◆ B [80-89] =5 (28%)
- ◆ C [70-79] =3 (17%)
- ◆ D [60-69] =0 (0%)
- ◆ F [0-59] =2 (11%)

Frankly, it's quite bothersome to teach a class with 89% A's, B's, and C's, and to realize that 100% of the class score D or below on the post-course knowledge test.

CONCLUSIONS

We are glad we tried the experiment. We learned a lot, even if it seems like we just asked questions. The problem with questions is they demand answers, and we are already figuring out ways to find those answers.

Among those things we have been able to ascertain is the failure of either instrument to cover Realism. Using the test, we have been able to rank the questions from the one with the highest score to that with the lowest. Obviously we are going to have to improve our teaching of the bottom-dwellers.

We worry about the low scores on the pre-course knowledge test. More knowledge should have been transferred from other classes to allow students to answer these questions. On the other hand, according to Gerald Nosich, 90% of student's knowledge is forgotten three months after the completion of a course. If Nosich's statistic is correct, should we even worry about knowledge?

After reviving from the initial shock at the discrepancy between final grades and scores on the knowledge test, we realized that a student's grade rests on so much more than mere cumulative knowledge. Daily quizzes, class participation, section tests, and papers all factor into our final evaluation. In fact, for us the main objective of ENG 351 is not about Am Lit per se, but rather it's to lead students to develop a scholarly frame of mind, and because that's a transferable skill we value it more in our students than knowledge acquisition. We assess that skill through the publishable scholarly note. Eventually we would like to see the entire litera-

ture section of our department go to the same objective, establish a mutually agreed-upon rubric, and assess the notes as a group—i.e., blindly, making sure we don't grade our own students. That kind of assessment seems more valuable than the knowledge survey and test combined.

Ultimately, we have to admit we are better teachers of American Literature—short fiction, poetry, novels, drama, and essays—because of this experiment. On the other hand, we are busy faculty who wonder if the gain is worth the time it took. Well, as Elvis told us, "You've got to walk that lonesome valley/Well you gotta go there by yourself."

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